

Saint Anger by maikurosaki

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Language: English

Characters: Benny Hammond, Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mr. Harrington (Stranger Things), Mr. Sinclair (Stranger Things), Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Tommy H. (Stranger Things)

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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Summary:

Hopper sighed and scratched his beard. "Look, kid, the reason why I'm offering you a second chance is because you need it. You don't deserve it, but you need it. So I got your back."

Or how, on his harrowing road to redemption (because second chances don't come easy), Billy Hargrove loses a good-for-nothing father, but gains a tough little sister, a giant older brother, a preppy boyfriend, and an obnoxious pack of nerds, not necessarily in this particular order.

1. Saint Anger

Summary for the Chapter:

In which Billy gets a second chance but he isn't too thrilled about it.

Notes for the Chapter:

The title was inspired by "St. Anger" from Metallica because I think it's a perfect song for Billy.

Billy has a long road ahead of him. Also, Benny Hammond is alive and well in my story, reincarnated as a wise mechanic, because I was outraged by his sudden demise.

Billy Hargrove was about to embark on a whole new era of his life (not that he knew it yet), but as he opened his eyes groggily on the Byers' couch, it didn't feel that way (not that he cared).

He stared at the ceiling for a few minutes as he barely dared to breathe, simply overwhelmed by the sudden memory of what had happened the previous night. In fact, the whole course of events rushed in his mind with the power of a goddamn freight train. The angry haze that had turned everything into a terrible thirst for blood, the deeply bitter taste of humiliation of his defeat (Maxine was indeed the bitch he had always suspected she was) combined with the unbearable thought that he might have killed Harrington last night made him feel for once like the piece of shit that his father always predicted he would become. He had no knowledge of what had happened afterward after that bitch drugged him but he could still remember those little freaks' sour smell of fear and blood. He had murmured I understand in defeat, but Billy suspected that he had understood something essential about himself in that particularly undignified episode of his life.

"Good, you're awake," the baritone voice of Sheriff Hopper jerked him out of his revelry, enough to turn his head to the side. The man in question was dressed in a rather crinkled uniform and held two cups

of coffee with the air of a man that was pretty close to crushing out of sheer exhaustion.

"Sir," Billy muttered as he slowly stood up, a blanket pooling around his middle. "Did I-?" He stopped, took a deep breath as he licked his lips and tried to untangle his tongue from the roof of his mouth, because how the fuck was he going to ask whether he killed a man last night? "Harrington?" He whispered, at last, his eyes staring unblinkingly at his still bloodied knuckles. He really was a pitiful excuse for a human being.

"He's not dead if that's what you're asking, but that's no thanks to you," Hopper said much closer and Billy was stunned to see the man take a seat on the coffee table right in Billy's space as he extended him a cup of coffee. The knowledge that he hadn't killed Harrington didn't soothe his already frayed nerves. Billy's hand shook so bad, he spilled half of the cup on him before he managed to steady it and take a sip. The Sheriff's eyes took in all the distress but said nothing and Billy didn't think he deserved any comfort anyway.

He took a sip of coffee again and wondered why he wasn't in police custody yet. He peered through his eyelashes around the living room and was surprised to see that the strange drawings that had adorned the walls last night were gone. The room was clean and the missing window had been replaced with a sheet. Soft noises from the kitchen floated towards the cold living-room but other than that, the Byers house looked peaceful and quiet.

"Am I under arrest?" He asked mutinously.

"Nope," Hopper said and Billy looked up again. The frown on Sheriff's face had deepened and, up close, the bags under his eyes, the disheveled hair and the sheer exhaustion were all signs of a man who had had a rough night. But his eyes were steady and true and Billy hated him so much in that moment. Because he knew, he just fucking knew that a sermon was about to come.

"Last night you almost killed a man," the sheriff said matter-of-factly and took a sip of his own coffee. "You threatened your sister, you attacked a 13-year-old boy and you trespassed a private property. Based on all these accounts, I could shove up your ass in the

correctional system so far that by the time you'd get out, you'd be too old to remember how to use a fucking phone."

"Is this where you tell me that I'm a fucking piece of trash, but that you're still giving me a chance?" Billy bristled, gripping the cup of coffee so hard that his hurt knuckles began to bleed again. A painful lurch unsettled his stomach and it sure as hell wasn't because of the drugs Maxine used on him last night.

"Pretty much yeah, without me necessarily thinking you're a piece of trash." Hopper carded his fingers through his thinning hair and sighed heavily. His slightly yellowish fingers twitched, a clear sign of a guy with a nicotine addiction who couldn't be bothered at the moment to get a fix. "Look, kid, what do you want more than anything at the moment?"

"Get the fuck out of here and not have to listen to your bullshit," Billy sneered. He put the mug down on the table next to Hopper and looked back at the sheriff almost daring him to say or do something.

"Yeah, I would too, if I were you." Hopped actually chuckled and drank more coffee. "But okay, I'll answer this question for you. More than anything in the world, you want to get out of Hawkins and possibly not see your daddy ever again in that order. Am I right?"

Anger pushed through his veins like a rocket's ignition and he growled at the sheriff, "You know nothing about me!"

"Boy, I'd recognize your daddy issues, even if I'd be deaf, mute and blind," Hopper replied sounding actually bored now. It angered Billy all the more. "I recognize them because I have them too and probably because half of this godforsaken town has them. I don't know whether your father beats the shit out of you, calls you a piece of shit all the time, or simply ignores your existence. And frankly, I don't give a damn after the shit you pulled last night. Mostly because I'm too old, too fucking tired and I had to deal with real fucking monsters." Hopper pinched his nose and sighed heavily. "Whatever is being done to you, it will never – hear me well – *never* justify what you did last night. You understand?"

Billy's eyes stung suspiciously to the point he had to rub them hard in

order not to cry in front of this man.

"Yes, *sir*," he replied viciously.

"Good. Right now you have three options." Hopper raised his thumb and continued, "One, you stay on this path until you kill yourself or someone else. Two, you don't kill anyone, but you become as bad as your dad or a drunkard. Or three, you get a job, keep your good GPA and get the fuck out of Hawkins after graduation with some money under your belt and an actual chance at a life that *you want*, under your own terms."

"Right," he snapped although the idea that he might become just like his dad made him want to throw up. "Like anyone is going to give me a job."

"I'll make sure to put a word for you."

"And why the fuck would you do that?" Billy bit his lip hard.

"Because if you choose option three, then you'll need help and although you might still have your pride, it sure as hell won't keep you fed when you leave this town. So my question is: can you fix cars?"

"Yeah, but just basic stuff," Billy mumbled slightly dazed.

"Great," Hopper said. "I have a friend who was looking for someone to help him out with the garage. You'll work four hours a day after school, including Saturdays, if Benny wants you to. I'll make sure he pays you fair and square. You will attend school and keep your current grades. And you'll come with me for work-out sessions twice a week. Non-negotiable."

"What the fuck, old man?" Billy shouted and slammed his body against the backrest of the couch. He crossed his arms, stamping his left foot. "Who the fuck do you think you are with all these demands? I won't have a goddamn life."

"I honestly don't give a crap, kid," Hopper said as his voice hardened. "Let me repeat myself: these terms are non-negotiable. On top of that, you'll stay the hell away from your sister, the kids, and Harrington."

I've made up a file with all the evidence I need, I took photos of Harrington's face, I have the medical report, and the official statements from the kids. So you know what that means." Hopper drank the last of his coffee and put the cup next to Billy's. His eyes were cold and calculating. Billy couldn't suppress the cold shiver trickling down his spine. "Respect the terms that I gave you and you might have a chance at a better life. Any wrongdoing on your part – dare to breathe wrongly around the kids or Harrington – and I promise you," and the sheriff leaned forward staring directly into Billy's eyes, "they'll never find you."

Billy swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. Fear and the humiliation of such an emotion boiled in a terrible blend inside of him, but Billy Hargrove wasn't stupid. He was being offered a chance here, a real chance at something. Plus he really believed that the sheriff would either bury him alive in the correctional system or could make him disappear. He squared his shoulders although at this point his posturing was futile. The sheriff was probably more than capable of smelling his fear.

"Yes, sir," he answered chagrined at his capitulation, the words ringing hollowly in the silence of the room.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I accept the terms."

Hopper took a good look at him as if he would be able to see whether Billy was lying to him or not. And the funny thing was Billy had been a lot of things in his life, but a liar he was not. He stared right back, discontent and hate boiling down his last resistance.

"Fine, then grab your jacket and I'll drop you home," Hopper said and stood up, ignoring Billy's flinch. He grabbed the mugs and disappeared into the kitchen. Billy noticed his jacket at the end of the couch and pulled it on him. He took a look outside the unbroken window and realized with a pang of worry that his Camaro wasn't parked there anymore, nor was Harrington's Beemer.

"Your car is already at your house. Come on!" The sheriff's words poured ice into his veins. His father was going to kill him. His father

was going to beat the shit out of him then kill him and Billy hated this cop that pretended to fucking care when in reality he was bringing him to his doom. He jumped into the police car and looked at the sheriff as Hopper took a cigarette out of the pack and offered him one as well. Billy took it with trembling hands. It took him a few tries to light it up, but the sudden fix of nicotine did nothing to assuage his fears.

The drive was silent, the radio crackling every once in a while with information from the other deputies but nothing major. Not that Billy was listening to it anyway. He couldn't even think about the fact that his own father was going to kill him for not bringing Maxine home last night, for missing the whole night. All he could think of was the fact that Hopper was offering him a chance at a new life and Billy hated his guts for it. He hated the man so fucking much, even more than he hated Harrington last night with his preppy look and doe eyes and his fucking courage to stand up to Billy when no one would. And that made Billy wonder what kind of person he really was – someone offered him a second chance and he hated the man for it.

Was he truly going to become fucked up like his dad? He was surely on the road for it with the way he had behaved with Maxine and Harrington and the other little freaks. He had never noticed before, but he sure as hell served the same lines like his father. Besides, Billy had grabbed Max and pushed her around, he was abusive towards her and towards other people, getting high on smelling their fear, on their flinches, on their weariness. Therefore, say if Hopper would choose to make him disappear, after all, no one would care, no one would notice and his father and that stupid Susan would probably be relieved.

That made him almost choke on the smoke of the cigarette. The sudden realization that no one in this godforsaken world would ever care about him hit him like a wall of knives, cutting deep and leaving puss and poison behind. He bit the inside of his cheek so hard he could taste blood again. Billy could blame his dad as much as he wanted, but it sure as hell looked more like his own fault rather than his dad's.

It was not his father who pummeled Harrington's face last night. *Billy had been the one.* He had been itching for a fight with the King of

Hawkins, irritated by his complacent nature. As if, all of a sudden, Harrington had more important things to do in his life and decided that Billy Hargrove was just an insignificant insect in his path. It was so satisfying seeing his startled face when he put him to the ground. It was wonderful to smash that plate on his head and to keep hitting him. The red haze of anger, of the humiliation of that permanent fear in which he lived, blinded him. He could have killed Harrington last night. He could have killed him or put him in the hospital forever. Those fucking doe eyes that had haunted his dreams ever since he took a glimpse and he had almost burned the light out of them.

The thought made him so sick to his stomach that he shouted *Stop the car* to Hopper. Surprisingly, the sheriff listened to him and pulled aside just in time for Billy to open the door and puke his guts out. Every retch was painful, he vomited mostly bile as he hadn't had anything to eat since yesterday morning. The dry-heaving was worse and brought fresh tears to his eyes and he was pathetically grateful that Hopper didn't touch him. He took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp morning air and spit one last time before he closed his door and slammed his head against the headrest a few times with a viciousness that surprised even him, but Hopper just breathed quietly next to him.

"My own father used to say I would amount to nothing," he heard Hopper saying. "He loved to give me a choice between his belt and a piece of rope he brought from work as if that would make any difference. *Respect, boy. You'll amount to nothing but as long as you'll stay in my house, you'll learn respect.*" Billy opened his eyes and glanced at the sheriff as he leaned against the steering wheel and looked through the windscreen seemingly lost in the past. "My favorite moment is him showing me his hunting rifles. One by one, laying them on the coffee table, showing them to me, how well-kept they were. Not because we were bonding over them – the sick fuck was telling me how my life belonged to him and he would make me or break me. *I gave you life, boy, I can take it back if I want.*"

There was something scary in Hopper's wild chuckle. Pure venom. "After the sorry bastard died – colon cancer as he deserved – I burned his clothes, gave all his personal belongings away and the rest I buried in the cellar. And I realized that my greatest revenge was yet

to come because I was going to make a life for myself. That sorry excuse for a human being wasn't going to take that away from me.”

“Why the fuck are you telling me this shit?” Billy asked as he finally wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Are you telling me your fucking sob story to impress me? To show me that you're not a fuck up like I am?”

“The county sheriff from Santa Monica called me the next day after you guys moved here,” Hopper replied ignoring Billy's jab. The teen took a sharp breath in as the sheriff finally turned his attention to him again. “He told me why you moved here. Asked me to keep an eye on your dad.”

Billy pressed his fingers into the meat of his forearm hard and merciless, but the pain couldn't clear the thought that someone knew. Someone fucking knew why he was here.

“Did he tell you it happened because I am a faggot?” Billy turned his whole body towards the sheriff, reveling in the shock on his face. “Yeah, sheriff, it was because daddy dear found out I like to suck cock and decided that he would rather kill me than have a fag as a son. Do you want me to suck yours too? Is this why you offered me work out sessions?” He raised his voice mockingly. “Is this why you wanted to help me out? Because we can take care of it right now and _”

Hopper's large hand landed gently on Billy's head. He was a big man – he could probably kill Billy with his pinky finger and no one would be wiser. But there was a kind smile on his face and his voice sounded terribly moved as he replied, “No offense, kid, but I don't swing your way. Also, you liking boys is no concern of mine.” Billy swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. “For all I care, people love whomever they want to love. As long as both parties are consenting and nothing illegal occurs, I don't care.” He slowly took his hand away. “After that call, I had a look at your file and your grades. I was going to offer you some help but I had to take care of some shit first.” Hopper sighed and scratched his beard. “Look, kid, the reason I'm offering you a second chance is because you need it. You don't deserve it, but you need it. So I got your back. As for your work-out sessions – well, we need to channel your anger towards

something useful, no?"

Hopper started the engine again and pulled the car on the road. Billy turned his face towards the window again and watched as his breath fogged the cold glass.

"You say you want to help me, but dad is going to kill me when you bring me back home," he choked on the words and closed his eyes as sudden tears fell on his cheeks. He raised his shoulders a bit higher and scrunched his eyes tight, hoping those traitorous tears wouldn't show how much his father terrified him.

"I already have a story, so just go with it."

"Thanks, I guess." He brushed his tears away, no gentleness in his gesture. "Why does he do that to me? I am *his son*," Billy heard himself asking almost in disbelief. "Why does he do that to me?"

"Because he's a piece of shit," Hopper said callously and Billy opened his eyes in shock and almost got a whiplash as he turned towards the man again. Hopper glanced kindly at him and said much gentler than Billy deserved, "But you don't have to be."

The sheriff turned his attention back to the road and the rest of the drive was spent in silence. Secretly, Billy wanted it to never end. He kept peering at the sheriff, but he didn't say anything else. He didn't want to end up like his dad. He looked down at his bloodied knuckles.

When the car stopped in front of his house, his stomach plummeted but unreasonably so, he trusted the sheriff.

"Monday after school come to my office and I'll take you to Benny's place," Hopper said as he took in Neil Hargrove standing in the doorway.

"I need to drop Maxine home first." Each word came out with much difficulty as he too stood a little straighter in his seat, his hands clasped tightly against the handle of the car.

"Do that first then." Hopper grabbed his shoulder and squeezed lightly. "Ready, kid?"

"No, but what other choice do I have?"

"A lot more than you had yesterday," Hopper mumbled and got out of the car as Billy followed suit.

"Good morning, Mr. Hargrove. I'm Sheriff Hopper. I believe you spoke with one of my deputies last night, Officer Powell." Billy noticed with a secret kind of glee that the sheriff almost dwarfed his father, Neil Hargrove actually taking a step back and letting them in, though his grey eyes narrowed menacingly.

"Good morning, sheriff. Yes, I did, although he wasn't very clear on what happened. What did my good for nothing son do this time?"

They all entered the living room and Billy bowed his head, not daring to look at his father. He noticed Susan disappearing into the kitchen like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. Billy hated her too. She stood by and did nothing, probably hoping that whatever happened to Billy at Neil's hands would never reach her. Or Max. Billy swallowed hard. He hated that little bitch but he would never wish Neil Hargrove on her.

"Nothing, sir." Hopper refused to take a seat when he was offered one. "In fact, I came with him to apologize for keeping him all night with us. He was of great help last night for the Hawkins police in apprehending a drug gang."

"A drug gang? Here in Hawkins?" His father's voice boomed into an icy fire. "Was my son involved with any of them?"

"No, sir, but we needed a young man to help us infiltrate there. I met with Billy here on his way from picking up Maxine and I asked for his help. I can't give many details, police confidentiality and all that crap, but rest assured that your son was vital to what happened last night and most likely will receive a commendation."

"A commendation?" Neil Hargrove couldn't hide his disdainful wonder even if he tried.

"Yes, sir. It won't be much. Probably a letter and a few dollars as a reward, but still, it's something." Hopper changed his weight on the

other leg and said almost menacingly, "I hope that you are proud of your boy. You have a great kid."

"Well, sheriff, I do try my best to teach him respect and responsibility," Neil replied but there was a sense of uncertainty in the way he crossed his arms in front of him. Hopper smiled like a shark smelling blood in the blue wide ocean.

"Yes, it's not always easy. Well, Billy, thank you again for your help in the matter." They shook hands and Billy watched in wonder as his father extended his hand for the sheriff to grab it. "And thank you, Mr. Hargrove, for being so understanding." He made his way towards the door when he turned back to Neil Hargrove with the same shark smile, "By the way, whereabouts in California you moved from?"

"Santa Monica," his father replied but his unease was now blatantly evident. Billy stood ramrod still, barely daring to breathe.

"Really? You don't say. Just the other day, I talked with the sheriff department from there regarding a case. How small is the world!" Billy watched as his father's shoulders became a tense line, and though his fear kept him tight as a coil, he couldn't help but smirk. Oh, sheriff Hopper was good. He was really good.

"Yes, small," Neil Hargrove repeated, his voice barely there.

"Well, thank you once again. Billy, I'll be waiting for you on Monday then."

"Monday? What for?" His father asked as he led the sheriff to the door.

"One of my friends needed some help at the garage and Billy here mentioned knowing some things about cars."

"Yeah, maybe changing the oil and take care of the battery," his father's snide remark made Hopper narrow his eyes in disapproval.

"Well, we all have to start from somewhere." The sheriff put his hat on his head and looked sharply at Neil Hargrove. "And you just mentioned that you want to teach responsibility to your son. What better way to start than finding some work to do?"

"Indeed," Neil mumbled at a loss. What a dipshit, Billy thought as he took a good look at his father. Neil was probably baffled as to why the sheriff couldn't see that his son was a fucking good for nothing white trash. They said goodbyes, but Billy stood still in the living-room waiting for his father to return. He wasn't stupid and he knew that, just because all of a sudden sheriff Hopper was taking an interest in him, it didn't mean that Neil Hargrove wasn't going to give him a piece of his mind.

Therefore, Billy was shocked when his father returned to the room and appraised his son like he was a piece of meat with some mild tendencies of thinking on his own every so often.

"Maybe there's some hope for you after all," Neil Hargrove sneered at last. "Though I don't believe anything from what that sheriff mentioned." He stepped into Billy's space and grabbed him painfully by the chin, forcing Billy to look directly into his eyes. "I'll keep an eye on you though, boy. And you'd better not mention anything that happened in Santa Monica to the good old sheriff. Though I don't think he'd give a damn about you if he knew that you're a faggot." Neil forced his head a little more backward, making Billy raise slightly on the balls of his feet. "You got that, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Then go to your room and clean up your mess. It's a fucking biological hazard in there."

"Yes, sir."

His father let him go at last and Billy hurried towards his room, relieved that he was only getting the Neil Hargrove's patented encouraging talk rather than his fists. Max was standing in the doorway of her room and looked full of hate and sorrow, but Billy couldn't be bothered with the little shit at the moment. He ignored her and closed the door to his room with a soft click. He lay in bed and closed his eyes.

Now if only he could find a way of not hearing Harrington's little gasps of pain constantly replaying in his ears that would be great.

~O~

Billy threw an incredulous look at Sheriff Hopper, hoping to convey his consternation but also his reluctance at being left alone with Benny Hammond.

Because Benny Hammond? Was a fucking grizzly of a man and could eat Billy for breakfast then use his bones as toothpicks. The guy must have been at least six feet five, built like a brick shit house, with a thick beard and bald-headed. When they shook hands, his hand completely dwarfed Billy's and the teen couldn't help but take a step back as soon as the man let go of his hand. Benny Hammond didn't look like a guy Billy wanted to piss off. In fact, he looked like a guy that would help Sheriff Hopper hide Billy's body. Also, what the fuck was with Hawkins and surnames starting with H? Was it mandatory to move to this shithole? Fucking hell!

Hammond took one look at Billy then one look at the sheriff. He huffed out loud when he finally said, "Seriously, Hop? Do I look like a fucking charity house?"

"I'm no fucking charity case!" Billy snarled and crossed his arms. "I don't want to be fucking here, you don't want me to be here. Case fucking closed then."

"Billy here," Hopper said and grabbed Billy's shoulder in a slightly painful squeeze, while the teen futilely tried to jerk out of his grasp, "needs work to get out of Hawkins. He doesn't know much about cars but he's a fast learner. You need help. There: you guys are a match made in the mechanical heaven."

"I swear to God, Hop, only you," Hammond replied and rolled his eyes put upon. "Fine, but if he breaks anything, you'll foot the bill."

"Just shut up and teach the boy, Benny."

Hopper and Hammond continued their banter as Billy took in the small office in which Hammond had brought them, not caring about their discussion one way or the other. The garage was not far from the police station, just off Main Street, hidden behind some old crumbling buildings. It was big enough for maybe three cars to be

brought in, the rest were parked in the back, where a medium size junkyard lay. Hammond's office was small, surrounded by glass walls and smelling of oil. There was a signboard just behind Hammond with various notes and mechanic bills and Billy almost rolled his eyes again, but it sure as hell looked like the guy needed some extra help organizing. The desk was small, old and filled with just about everything from spark plugs to automotive magazines to inventory sheets and invoices.

Great! Just fucking awesome! Billy was convinced now that Hammond would keep a close eye on him and if he dared to do anything wrong, he would report quickly to the good old fucking sheriff. The familiar anger bubbled just above the surface again. He was ready to tell both men to fuck off and stick their job to where the sun don't shine, but one look at them both and Billy swallowed his tongue. These guys were fucking giants. Like what the fuck did these guys eat for breakfast? Little shits like Billy? Were they brothers? They sure as hell looked alike.

Hammond rapped on the desk three times grabbing Billy's attention, "Come on, kid, let's get you a uniform and something to do."

Billy opened his mouth ready to tell Hammond just what his thoughts were about that option but one warning look from Sheriff Hopper stopped him. They all stood up and went in the back where there was another room, which probably served as a staff room but honestly looked like a combination between a locker-room, a kitchen, and storage closet, all in one. Hammond opened one of the lockers and looked through the old and greasy uniforms until he was satisfied and threw one at Billy. He also grabbed an old pair of boots and shoved them in Billy's arms.

"Get changed," Hammond ordered curtly. "You can leave your stuff in this locker. Be ready in ten."

Billy nodded because he understood orders, they've been thrown at him all his life. Hammond closed the door after him and left Billy alone. He sighed heavily and sat on a bench as he took his leather jacket off.

It had been a really bad day today.

It had started in the morning when he realized on the way to school that Max was ignoring him completely. It was like she had erased his existence from this plane of reality because she kept staring out of the window as if the car was driving itself. The little bitch wouldn't look at him, wouldn't even huff in annoyance when he turned on the music obnoxiously loud, wouldn't even glance at him when he started to speed up. Billy was itching for a fight, skin tight around him, suffocating him and even the delicious drag of a cigarette couldn't banish the thought that somehow the previous night he had just lost his step-sister for real.

And if Billy had thought that this was the worst thing that happened to him, Harrington's absence had been like a rusty and blunt knife to his gut. For some fucked up reason, he had thought that the teen might be coming to school, but Tommy gave him the news as soon as he stepped within the school: King Steve was at home sick and he would miss that day's practice. Billy pushed his books inside the locker and left Tommy and Carol still talking. That Wheeler bitch had glared at him all through AP English and he fucking hated her all the more. Where the fuck was she when he was kicking Harrington's ass? Probably getting high with that creepy Byers kid.

On and on and fucking on, his thoughts swirled, all revolving around Harrington. Throughout the day, Billy wondered whether Harrington had been concussed, whether he had needed to go to the hospital, whether anyone was taking care of him at the moment. How had he fucked up like that? He skipped lunch and went and smoked in the bleachers, watching the grey Indiana sky, but it didn't offer him any satisfying answers. Did he even deserve to have answers? Billy very much doubted. He didn't go to basketball practice after that.

"Stop staring at the ground, Hargrove!" Hammond took one look at him and sighed. "Come on, let's see what you're made of."

Billy only tensed further as if expecting a fight, but Hammond just got out of the room and the teen had no choice but to follow him. The other mechanic took one long look at him then focused again on the Buick. Billy supposed that one look had been more than enough for a first terrible impression.

Hammond had stopped in front of a work table made of metal with

various tools and carburetors on it and crossed his arms in front of him. For one wild second, he looked like a drill sergeant.

“Your mission for this week is to clean these carburetors,” Hammond said and showed a piece of metal that vaguely resembled what Billy thought a carburetor might look like. “I’ll show you how to do it then I expect you to finish them by the time you leave home. You’re allowed only four cigarette breaks, no more than ten minutes. You can take a half an hour break for food if you bought any. You’ll get your money at the end of each week on Saturdays. I expect you to be on time and respectful.” Hammond leaned forward a little as he made for a carburetor and a piece of cloth; however, it was enough to make Billy flinch. His reaction must have surprised his boss because the man pulled back right away.

“Yes, sir,” Billy mumbled just to be on the safe side.

“You don’t need to call me *sir*,” Hammond said and looked away. “You can call me boss, Benny or Hammond, whichever suits you. Lennie over there calls me *pain in the ass* all the time, but we’ve been working together for the past nine years now, so I figured he’s entitled to.” Hammond smiled friendly enough but Billy didn’t answer in kind. He simply nodded and waited for instructions. He was good at that – like a stupid dog without a mind of his own. Hammond sighed and proceeded to show him what he needed to do in order to clean properly a carburetor.

~O~

The day started wrongly from the moment he woke up.

He opened his eyes suddenly, just before the blaring alarm. He had been dreaming of Harrington and his bruised up face, but in his dream, no one had stopped him and he had killed Harrington. The image of his corpse had been burnt onto his retina and he flew to the bathroom, forgetting all about the alarm. He dry-heaved a few times but nothing came up and he had to grip the sink in order not to fall down. He washed his face and brushed his teeth, avoiding checking himself in the mirror.

The morning turned for the worst when Billy realized that his father

had not gone to work yet. His stomach sank to new lows as Neil Hargrove watched him above the newspaper. The sheriff had sent a bullshit letter a few days ago about how the department was grateful for Billy's help and a check of fifteen dollars as a reward for his fake cooperation. The letter didn't assuage his father's doubts and he barely deigned to give Billy the check. As Neil Hargrove watched him pour himself a cup of coffee, Billy felt his hands slightly shaking and he had to sit down and munch on a toast as Susan and Max kept a light chatter.

"Maybe that Hammond guy might help you get a haircut," his father said archly. "Heard he has been in the military – don't know why he accepts you looking like a bum." Billy just stared down at the table and tried to will himself to swallow the toast. There was no point engaging in that conversation because Billy was going to lose. His father returned his attention back to the newspaper and Billy heard himself breathe shallowly.

Then he got in the car with Max, who still wouldn't fucking talk to him. Even Susan had noticed that Max never spoke to Billy and he couldn't forget the satisfaction that he could read on his father's face when he heard that. In spite the fact that he had bought her a new skateboard from his first pay-checks, she couldn't even stoop to look at him. He had left it on her bed without any note because what was the point anyway but he had hoped that such a gesture would make her at least say thanks or screw you.

"So what now?" He asked belligerently just before she could climb out the car. "You're never going to speak to me again? Is that it?"

She had turned her beautiful icy eyes at him then, stared him down and snarled, "Fucking understand that I want you to leave me alone." She slammed the door with enough resentment to power a small country.

Billy had to smoke three fucking cigarettes before he'd be calm down enough to attend one shit class after another. By the time basketball practice had come, his patience was running really low. The fact that Tommy was acting like a dickhead and kept on harassing Harrington didn't help the matters.

“Plant your fucking feet, Harrington!” He heard himself shout the third time Tommy slammed Harrington to the floor. Upon hearing the words, Harrington had turned absolutely white, which made Billy feel sick to his stomach. Before he thought better of it, he grabbed the teen by the forearm and pulled him up. The sudden move caused Harrington to slide a little forward and press his palm against Billy's chest. The gesture seemed to shatter them both because Billy let go of Harrington's forearm as if he was on fire and King Steve had taken his hand back as if it had touched something foul and tainted.

But the simple gesture burnt through all of Billy's defenses – he could smell Harrington's sweat mixed with that cologne that he was always using. But the touch, although short and almost over before the next blink, had short-circuited all Billy's synapses – what kind of piece of shit would beat the shit out of the boy he had liked from the very beginning?

“Bend your knees, Harrington, but keep them soft,” he indicated through gritted teeth and showed him how to do it. Harrington stared uncomprehendingly for a moment at Billy, weary and tired. Then as if jolted awake by the boys around them that kept the game going, he shook his head slightly and followed Billy's advice. “Good,” Billy encouraged him. “Now you're right-handed so you'll always need to keep your left shoulder a bit jutted out as if it is your own shield,” he said and showed him again the move. The teen followed his instructions.

“If you're done stealing my job, Hargrove, you two get back in the goddamn game!” The coach hollered at them and Harrington dismissed him almost instantly. But when Billy saw him using successfully the move that he had just taught him against Tommy, something tight and almost painful clawed at his chest.

Harrington hadn't said one word to him either. In fact, since he had returned back to school after the incident, he had done his best to avoid Billy, always flanked by Wheeler and Byers and the still adoring cohort. During practice, Billy had done his best to be on the same team with Harrington so that he wouldn't have to interact with him other than strictly necessary. And when they had played in opposing teams, Billy had stayed the fuck away from him and let Tommy or other team-mates keep the focus on Harrington. Billy

didn't know what he wanted to achieve with that, but he sure as hell wasn't this – Harrington looking at him like he couldn't stand the sight of him. He was fucking sorry, why couldn't Harrington just see that?

He'd been the first one to get out of the showers and change, leaving the locker room like he was chased by something foul. By the time he had got to work, he couldn't stand it anymore. As soon as he got out of the car, he grabbed a crowbar and without even answering to Hammond's hello, he hit the windscreen of a Sedan with such a satisfying crunch that he must have heard fucking angels sing.

He hit it again and again and again, getting lost in the violence of it. Fuck this! He didn't need anyone.

~O~

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" He shouted as he hit his head repeatedly against the wall. The jarring pain was nothing compared to the disgust that he was currently feeling. Defeated, he turned, leaned against the wall and, like a puppet with no strings attached, fell down on the frozen dirt. Fucking life and fucking cars! Fucking asshole of a father and fucking backwaters town full of hicks that don't care about anything but themselves! And fucking useless county sheriffs and their good intentions! Fuck those too! And fuck Billy Hargrove for even trying to do some good! He grabbed his hair and pulled hard. He's a fucking useless piece of shit!

He thought for a moment to just leave. Just get into the Camaro and just drive and drive and drive until he would reach the end of the world and forget about himself and the house he came from. But realistically speaking, he could probably drive all the way to Montana before his gas money would end. And he was a useless piece of shit, what could he possibly do to earn some gas money? He'd just have to let Hammond beat the shit out of him, then call Hopper to lock his ass away for eternity.

It took him a while to realize that Hammond had followed him outside and had sat quietly next to him. Silently, that grizzly of a man bummed a cigarette from him and lit it up, before choking a few times, coughing like an asthmatic as he finally managed to get used

to the bitter taste of the cigarette. They both smoked in companionable silence for a while. The fact that Benny Hammond hadn't murdered him yet was a miracle in itself.

"I thought that you didn't smoke." Billy's hoarse voice sounded harsh as if he had drunk a shot of gravel mixed with glass.

"I'm not, but I feel like I'll need one for the talk we're about to have." Benny didn't sound angry, but rather tired and maybe a little disappointed.

"Are you going to fuck me up?" Billy asked, at last, his stomach doing a somersault.

"I think you're fucked up enough," Benny replied but not unkind and took another drag from the cigarette. "Care to tell me what happened there?"

Billy closed his eyes as he smothered his cigarette. That unwavering fury that had alimented Billy's survival pushed all reasonable thoughts out of his mind and for one sick fucking moment, he just wanted to make Hammond kick his ass and then wait for Hopper. Screw Hawkins and screw his life! He fisted his hands, fingers digging deeply into the meat of his palms and he bit his lip really hard. He pulled his knees to his chest and pressed his forehead to his knees. On the other hand, he was so fucking tired of being so angry all the time. A perplexing exhaustion muted his desire to hide away and without even realizing, he opened up to Benny Hammond in a way he had never done before. Not with his friends back in California and certainly not with anyone here in Hawkins.

Even more perplexing though was the fact that Hammond – a Vietnam veteran who had probably seen and heard worse in his life – was listening patiently, smoking one cigarette after another, never interrupting Billy, no judgment in his eyes.

"I'm trying my fucking best and it's never good enough." Billy's voice was shot to hell, a big lump in his throat the size of a life spent in forced silence and solitude. "I keep my distance, I don't talk to anyone, I let them be, for fuck's sake! I try to make amends, but they all still look at me like I'm some sort of a disgusting cockroach under

their boots."

Benny nodded then looked into the distance and let the peace between them settle for a while. The sounds of moving cars and the radio from inside the garage seemed to belong to a completely different world.

Just when Billy was about to say fuck it and leave, Benny said, "My dad told me a story once of a man that had a terrible son." Billy rolled his eyes – he seriously wasn't in the mood of listening to this bullshit and he must have said that out loud because Hammond obnoxiously reminded him who's the boss. "I'll sit on you if I have to, kid, don't think I won't. So *anyway*, for all the son's bad deeds, the father would hammer a nail in the door – don't ask me why, it didn't make sense to me either, just go with it. Anyway, his son continued with this behavior until the door was full of nails. But then miraculously, the son fell in love and began to change his ways. He started to behave like the man his father always thought he was and for each good deed, his father would take a nail out."

Benny took another cigarette from Billy's pack and continued, after he lit it up, "So there comes a day when the father and the son finally look at a nail-less door. The son smiles proudly and looks at his father, waiting for his approval, but only sees a frown on his face. *But father, I took the nails out, I am the good man you always wanted me to be. Why are you so upset?* To which the father replies *What about the holes, my son?*"

"Is there a point to this fucking story?" Billy asked harshly though he wasn't stupid and he already guessed what kind of point Hammond was trying to make. He expected his boss to get annoyed but instead, he just chuckled and looked up at the grey sky again.

"Yeah, there is a fucking point to this story. Actually, two, and something tells me you already guessed the first one." Benny glanced at him and Billy found himself nodding.

"Yeah, just because all of a sudden, I'm trying my fucking best doesn't necessarily mean that it's worth shit in people's eyes."

"Yeah, or even better," and Benny pointed with the cigarette at him,

“the wounds you inflicted on people don't heal so easily. Besides, I don't want to piss on your parade, boy, but you actually haven't tried hard enough. Shut your pie-hole and listen,” Benny carried on when he saw Billy opening his mouth. The teen closed his mouth sullenly. “Now apart from showing that kid how to plant his feet and buying your sister-”

“Step-sister,” he mumbled.

“Sure, your step-sister. Apart from buying your step-sister that skateboard and apart from basically ignoring just about everyone, have you actively been apologizing? Have you actually said sorry?”

“No, and I'm not fucking going to,” Billy hissed and kicked the frozen dirt with the heels of his work boots like a petulant child.

“Then stop this fucking self-pity party for one that you have going on at the moment and accept the fact that you'll never make amends, they'll never forgive you because what the hell, they don't matter anyway, do they?” Benny pressed the cigarette in the ground and watched the disappearing embers. He was about to get up. Billy could feel it deeply into his bones that he would never be able to face Benny's disappointed face. More than anything else in this world, this would hurt the most and he wouldn't be able to accept the fact that he'd hurt the only fucking human that seemed to enjoy his company. On impulse, he gripped tightly the man's sleeve and forced him to sit back down.

Benny smirked down at him and, to his horror, Billy felt himself blush.

“Shut the fuck up!” He snarled but the malice was gone.

“I didn't say anything, kid.”

“You actually did, you dipshit.”

“No one ever taught you about respecting your elders?” Benny's smirk grew. It was actually giving him a slightly manic look.

“Yeah, my asshole father tried, but apparently I'm a tough cookie to break.”

“You sure are.”

“Okay, fine, old wise one, what do I need to do then?”

“You already know.”

“Apologize?” He mumbled morosely. “Try and actively make amends, though how the fuck I do that is beyond me. I can only buy so many fucking skateboards before I go bankrupt. As for Harrington, that guy is rich. He's King Steve. What could he possibly want from me?”

“A friend maybe?” Benny suggested, his smirk turning into a gentler smile. “Whatever you decide, you need to apologize but also accept the fact that you might not be forgiven.”

“Outstanding! That's just fan-fucking-tastic!” Billy stared at his work boots, the bitter taste in his mouth plunging his heart to a whole new low. He never actually considered that he might not be forgiven, even if he would do all the right things.

“Hey, remember when I told you there are two meanings to my story?” Benny patted Billy's hand that still gripped the man's sleeve. The teen dropped it so quickly he actually lost his balance. When he righted himself, Benny was still chuckling.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, old man!” He grouched. “What was the second meaning?”

“If someone tells you that you're a piece of shit, that you're worthless enough times, then, after a while, you start to believe them,” Benny answered in a kind voice. Billy's eyes stung and he quickly looked aside. A giant hand (seriously, this guy was massive) gently grabbed him by the chin and made him look back. The kind smile and the gentleness of the gesture were in such an opposition to the way his father had grabbed him only a month ago that Billy couldn't hide his tears away again. They fell embarrassingly and he really wanted to get away from them, from the kindness in Benny's eyes, but the weight of it all wouldn't let him.

“You're not a piece of shit, you aren't worthless, kid! Don't fucking believe him,” Benny said fiercely and pulled him into a hug. Billy

grabbed fistfuls of his uniform and tried to pull away uselessly, although he didn't fucking remember the last time he had been hugged. "You're not worthless, kid, all you have to do is believe that," Benny muttered in his ear and Billy went limp like a sack of potatoes. "You aren't a piece of shit, you aren't a lost cause. I promise you things will get better. You'll have a life far away from Hawkins and your dad. You'll find people who love you for who you really are." Benny squeezed the hell out of Billy, but the teen couldn't make himself care as he hugged back.

"I'm sorry for the windscreen," Billy gritted, hiding his face into Benny's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"I know, kid, and you're forgiven." Billy could feel Benny's chuckle against his cheek. "Hell, Miller pissed me off so many times this year, I thought about doing it myself once or twice. But this is once in a lifetime pass. Next time you feel like smashing something, go back in the junkyard, I'm sure you'll be able to find something to smash."

"All right, old man." Billy sniffed in a very obnoxious way but didn't let go.

"Did you just wipe your nose over my uniform?" Benny asked incredulously. "You did, didn't you, you little shit?"

"Deal with it!"

"Your ass is grass, Hargrove!" Benny growled but there was nothing menacing about it. He actually pulled Billy tighter in the hug and the teen found that he couldn't care less about the manly shit that his father kept spewing. He hid his face into Benny's shoulder and gripped tightly at his uniform, trying to get all the emotions under control, which was extremely difficult as he hadn't been touched affectionately since he left Santa Monica. And even then, it had been mostly from the boys with whom he kept fooling around.

But Benny Hammond was steady and true, a pillar of genuine affection, unlike anyone Billy had ever met. It felt as if they could have been brothers in another life, or even better, Benny could have been his dad, although he was too young for that.

"Also," Benny mumbled into his hair, affectionately patting his back, "we need to get you some winter clothes, kid, or you'll die of hypothermia by the end of December."

"I refuse to wear a fucking parka," Billy mumbled, finally pulling away and scrubbing his face harshly, avoiding Benny's eyes, though there was no reason anymore. Benny Hammond had seen him at his worst and had stood there and told Billy that he was worth something.

"I didn't say parka necessarily, but a winter coat for sure." Benny stood up and offered Billy a hand, which the teen accepted gratefully. "Some flannel shirts, maybe a thermal or two. And some good blue jeans."

"Fucking hell, Benny! Just hearing you talk about it gives me nightmares." They trekked back into the garage. "Are you trying to get me look like that Springsteen guy? Blue collar and shit?"

"You wouldn't know true rock if it came and bit you in the ass, Hargrove." Benny rolled his eyes, honestly, unbecoming of a guy his age. They both stood in front of Miller's Sedan, taking in Billy's work. Benny scratched his beard. "Well, I'd better order a windscreen for him and tell him to come and pick up his car the day after tomorrow. He won't be pleased, but who gives a shit about what pleases him?"

"Thanks, Benny," Billy spoke so softly he was chagrined when he realized that Hammond heard him. Billy looked in horror as Benny's eyes turned soft again, afraid that his boss might say something even more embarrassing.

"I'd say don't worry about it, but fucking hell, kid, I want you to worry about it because if you do this again, I'll break your legs." Billy smirked all knowingly because they both knew that it wasn't true. "Also, tonight come to my place and let's check what winter clothes I can give you. I was quite short before I hit another growth spurt while I was in the army so I might be able to find you some stuff from my high school era."

"Who the fuck do you call short, jolly giant?" Billy huffed as he picked his wrench and began working on Miller's Sedan again.

Although the windscreen was blown to shit, the carburetor still needed fixing. “Not all of us can be descendants of Goliath.”

“If the hanky fits, Hargrove,” Benny snarked back as he made his way towards the office while Lennie was chuckling quietly at their antics.

“I will kick your ass, Hammond,” Billy hollered back.

“Keep on dreaming, kid,” his boss shouted back, then paused for dramatic effect before adding, “you know, *California dreamin’*.” Lennie burst out laughing so hard he actually had to step away from the car he was currently working on. Billy scowled for good measure.

“Fuck you, Hammond! I quit!”

“That would have worked so much better, had you not threatened me with this for the past month, every single day.”

Billy threw his hands up and huffed but didn't add anything else, because his boss was a master when it came to exchanging jabs and something told Billy that he was going to lose big time. He ducked under the hood and tried to concentrate on fixing the damn car while ignoring the bloom of something warm and welcoming in the pit of his stomach.

You're not worthless.

Billy Hargrove hid his first sincere smile in the groves of a Sedan. It was the first real smile since moving to Hawkins.

~O~

Billy was tired and his back hurt like a bitch after Benny made him change tires to three cars and do their calibration. Then he had to change the oil and the oil filters to another two cars, including Mrs. Wheeler's – she kept throwing him disappointed glances when Benny informed her that she couldn't wait for her car to be ready there in the garage and that she would have to return that afternoon. Billy's fingernails were permanently tainted black and his calluses had calluses. He was scratched, bruised and there was constantly at least one band-aid around one of his fingers. But it was the best he had felt in years and he never complained about it.

He was humming *Immigrant Song* from Led Zeppelin while preparing a sandwich. He debated whether he should make an appearance at Kimmy's party or just turn in early, taking into consideration that tomorrow he was working eight hours and just because it was Saturday, Benny sure as hell didn't tolerate tardiness.

"Billy, drop your sister off to the Snowball dance." His father's sharp order jerked him out of his thoughts so violently he almost dropped the mustard on the floor. He turned around slowly and watched his father fastening his belt. Billy heard himself swallow hard, the sudden fear burning bitter down his throat.

"Sir?"

"I need you to drop off your sister to the Snowball dance and pick her up at ten," Neil huffed as he grabbed a glass from the dish rack and looked shrewdly at Billy. "Don't make me repeat myself, boy."

"Yes, sir," Billy was quick to reply. Apart from the occasional slap over the head or petty jabs, his father had kept his distance and Billy had been grateful for the respite. It helped that Billy was almost never home at the same time as his father, or if he was, both of them were just too goddamn tired from work to engage in a war of words that most of the times would end up with Billy slapped hard across the mouth or shoved into walls.

"Good," his father said and drank his glass of water. "Susan and I are going out but I expect you both to be at home and all tucked in bed by eleven." He pretended to put the glass back in the sink only to menacingly invade Billy's intimate space. His sharp inhale resonated throughout the quiet kitchen. "You'd better ensure that you respect my indications, otherwise you will regret it."

"Yes." The word left his lips so fast, Billy didn't even realize he said it until his father narrowed his eyes.

"What did we talk about?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good boy." Neil Hargrove patted his cheek. It was a clinical gesture

made only to threaten Billy, no affection whatsoever.

"What's going on?" Neil turned around to look at Max as if he didn't just threaten his own son and actually get high on the feeling that he was more powerful than his own flesh and blood.

"Nothing, Max," his father replied and stepped away. Billy didn't realize he was still holding his breath until his father made his way to Max and he was completely facing her. Billy took a deep breath, trying to calm the hammering in his chest but it was pretty difficult because the asshole was still in the kitchen. "Your brother here agreed to drop you to the Snowball dance. As I told him, he'll pick you up at ten and I expect you both to be home by eleven o'clock. All right?"

"Sure," Max replied but her eyes were fixed on Billy as if suddenly she found out something unexpectedly interesting. Assessing a situation pointlessly. Billy turned his back to her and poured some mustard on the ham, his hand shaking only slightly. He started to gather the things he took out for the sandwich and shoved them back in the fridge.

"If you're ready, Max, we'll leave in five minutes," Billy heard himself saying as he cleaned after himself. Neil Hargrove was just itching tonight to find an excuse to punch Billy, but the teen wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "Let me just grab my coat."

"You can have your sandwich first," his sister said hesitantly, still unsure of what had just occurred in the kitchen before she interrupted them.

"No, that's fine," Billy replied as soon as he saw the smirk on his father's face. "I'll have it on our way there. Go and take your coat."

"All right." She glanced at Neil and for a moment, Billy had a distinct feeling that the midget wanted to add something else, but then changed her mind at the last minute and both got out of the kitchen as if it was on fire.

The drive was silent, Billy having abandoned his sandwich in the back seat of the Camaro. He was itching to smoke a cigarette but for

that, he would have to open his window and he would ruin Max's hair. And she really looked beautiful this evening. So he kept paying attention to the road while the riffs of *Born in the USA* filled the silence between them. He had compromised by turning on the radio and frankly, this guy Springsteen wasn't bad at all. This was Benny's favorite song, probably because it talked about Vietnam veterans and both him and Hopper were vets too.

Max kept silently staring out into the dark. Night had been falling steadily earlier and earlier, giving Hawkins a kind of an eerie look, but for some reason, Billy found that comforting. Sometimes Billy still enjoyed going on long drives late in the evening, when the streets were empty and quiet, giving Billy the impression that he was the last man on earth. Even the forest that surrounded Hawkins on all sides appeared to actively collude with him, its barren trees complimenting the desolate picture that Hawkins made at night.

He stopped the car in the parking lot just as a guy started to question *What is Love* on the radio. Jesus, he seriously didn't need this shit tonight, not when there was a chance of seeing Harrington and he really didn't need more material to dream about at night. The more he tried to avoid thinking about Steve Harrington and his fucking doe eyes, the more the said bastard kept flooding his dreams. And Billy needed a respite from all that.

"Be here at ten," he said curtly as he realized that he couldn't see Harrington's BMW anywhere. Max grunted in acknowledgment but just as she pushed the door handle, Billy heard himself saying softly, "You look beautiful tonight, Max."

Her hand froze on the handle and her back tensed. Billy was horrified at himself by how soft his voice had sounded, he was no fucking pussy, thank you very much. He pulled his pack of cigarettes and pulled one out as Max slowly turned to him, her eyes filled with icy fire. Sometimes Billy wondered if Max was Neil Hargrove's real daughter because both of them could gather so much righteous fury within one look, it was almost hilarious (if that look wasn't always directed at Billy). And she was assessing him the same way she had done just a short while ago in the kitchen.

"Thanks, asshole," she mumbled without a bite and got out of the

car, slamming the door. She threw one look in his direction before she entered the hall. Billy could see the Wheeler bitch inside and something ugly churned inside of him. He was sure that Harrington would drop off that curly-haired nerd and would moon at Wheeler. He really didn't fucking get it. He opened the window and let the smoke get out. He pushed his AC/DC cassette inside and *Highway to Hell* blared in the empty parking lot. He slammed his right hand over the steering wheel and pulled out of the parking lot, trying to keep the rhythm of the song as he screamed together with Bon Scott that he was most definitely on the Highway to Hell. He didn't feel like going home, so he took a sharp left and made his way through the dark forest.

At the quarry, he parked his car and managed to eat his sandwich. He found an abandoned bottle of water under the passenger seat because Hopper was a sucker on hydration after each work out session. He washed the aftertaste and grabbed his pack of cigarettes before getting off the car and leaving the car door opened. It was a clear night and the guitar riffs from *Love Hungry Man* ripped through the silence. He sat on the hood of the car, pulling the coat tighter around his body. He only had his blue shirt underneath it and it sure as hell wasn't enough to keep the Indiana cold at bay. Just as the last song of the album, *Night Prowler*, began, another car's lights suddenly stole the calm that had settled around Billy. His whole body tensed especially when he realized that Harrington's Beemer had just parked alongside his car.

Billy swore softly as he flicked his half-smoked cigarette to the ground and tried to ignore the other teen, who seemed to debate whether to get out of the car or simply drive away. Since the incident on the court, Billy did his best not to touch Harrington, not even glance in his direction. By the half disgusted, half frightened look that Harrington had thrown to him back then, it was clear to Billy that he needed to step away as much as he fucking could. Benny and his make amends bullshit could go screw themselves! Also, Benny wouldn't have given him such an advice if he had known he was a fucking faggot!

The song ended and just as Billy jumped off the hood to change the cassette, Harrington appeared to reach a conclusion because he got

off the car and even in the semi-darkness, Billy could still see his weary look. Jesus fuck, Harrington looked so fucking preppy in his dark red jumper and dark coat, his hair perfectly in place. He looked so well put together that Billy had the sudden desire to just go and kiss the hell out of him, mess this perfect preppy look, make him come undone. A burst of flaming desire ignited low in his belly. It made him sick to his stomach – this impossibility of touching Steve Harrington, wreck him, mark him and map his body.

“I don't want any trouble, Hargrove,” Harrington said by the way of hello. His voice sounded steady if a bit weary. “I just needed a place to cool off-”

“Relax, princess, I get it,” Billy interrupted him harshly, rolling his eyes. “It's not like I own this area.” He looked away before adding, “If you're uncomfortable, I can leave.”

The following silence fell like a heavy shroud between them. In order to keep calm, Billy started to count his heartbeats. When he reached twenty, he decided that it was better to fuck off – Harrington was too nice to tell him so – and he was ready to get inside the car when the other boy replied hesitantly, “No, man, stay if you want.”

Startled, Billy looked at Harrington but it was too goddamn difficult to read his body language so he just nodded quietly and returned on the hood of his car, having completely forgotten about changing the cassette. He regretted that move instantly when Boston's *More Than a Feeling* pierced the silence between them.

“Seriously, Harrington?” He couldn't help saying as he stubbornly stared at the night sky. “Boston?”

“The fact that you know who they are, Hargrove, says more than you might think.” The snarky reply made him chuckle. Harrington never had a problem with facing Billy or keeping the step with him.

“Maybe, but seriously, you don't need to complete your preppy look with preppy music too, pretty boy. Dare a little.”

“Really? And what should I listen to then?” Came the unexpected the question, the tone slightly teasing which surprised Billy. He turned

and looked over his shoulder to Harrington, who wasn't even fucking smoking. He just lay on his hood and looked in the distance. He must have been thinking of the Wheeler bitch.

“Led Zeppelin? The Ramones? AC/DC? Metallica? Motorhead?” Billy averted his eyes as he lit another cigarette and took a long drag. “I have so many suggestions that we could stay here until tomorrow, princess.”

“The Beach Boys?” Harrington suggested playfully and Billy couldn't help but chuckle.

“Don't be an ass, princess!”

“Now, I can't be an ass and a princess at the same time,” Harrington observed, amusement still bubbling just above the surface.

“Sure you can. In fact. I bet you are a closeted fan of The Police and moon over how cool Sting must be.”

“I am most certainly not closeted and I'll have you know I moon over Stewart Copeland, not Sting. I always thought drummers were cooler.”

“Do you always sing *Every Breath You Take* before you go to bed every night?”

“Yes, and I sing twice *Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic* every morning.”

“Of course you do,” Billy mumbled because he knew pretty well whom Harrington was thinking about when listening to that song. Jealousy – ah, old friend.

“What's your favorite band then?” Harrington asked after a while and before long, Billy was waxing poetry about Metallica and Iron Maiden and the struggles for metal power between the two of them. In turn, Harrington talked about The Police and the spiritual journey that was listening to Queen and their *Bohemian Rhapsody*. By the time they had to leave to pick up their respective charges, Billy had smoked almost a pack of cigarettes – too nervous, always too nervous, when it came to Harrington – and the former king of

Hawkins had actually two or three as well. They were about to get into their respective cars when Billy called softly Harrington's name. The other boy turned towards him but Billy didn't dare to stare back so he turned his attention towards the breathless beauty of the quarry at night.

Shame and embarrassment burned in a bitter fire as he licked his lips and said quietly, "For what it's worth, I'm -" Jesus fucking Christ, why it was so difficult to open his goddamn mouth? Actively make amends, his ass! "Look, I'm sorry, Harrington, all right?" He said aggressively, annoyed at himself. "I'm sorry for that night." He ran his fingers through his hair but refused to look back at the other boy, afraid to see his reaction, the disgust, and the incredulity. "I have no excuse for that. I lost my temper and I used you as a human punching bag. I'm sorry." His voice sounded clogged even to him as he repeated one more time, "I'm so sorry."

He climbed into the car abruptly and slammed the door, refusing to look at Harrington. He couldn't bear the thought that his apology might not be welcomed, that – as Benny had warned him – in spite of doing the right thing, he might not be forgiven. And more than anything, in that particular moment, Billy Hargrove would have really loved to see Steve Harrington's beautiful brown eyes full of kindness and forgiveness.

As he reversed the car, he looked steadily ahead and drove on. Billy Hargrove never once got a response to his wishes. He was sure he wasn't going to get one now. No matter how much he would have loved to be just that.

Forgiven.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you [lambchop33](#) for the beta. You saved me and I'm truly grateful. :) Any mistakes left are mine and mine alone.

Trivia time:

Music plays an important role in this story and I tried

to keep in mind the timeline.

Led Zeppelin - *Immigrant Song* (1973)

Boston - *More Tahn a Feeling* (1976)

Queen - *Bohemian Rhapsody* (1975)

AC/DC - *Highway to Hell* (1979)

The Police - *Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic* from the album *Ghost in the Machine* (1981)

The police - *Every Breath You Take* from the album *Synchronicity* (1983)

Bruce Springsteen *Born in the USA* (1984)

The story will be updated once a week. Also, if you've made it this far, thank you for reading. :)

2. Saint Jude

Summary for the Chapter:

In which Billy hits some bumps on the road but gets the surprise of a lifetime on New Year's Eve.

Notes for the Chapter:

Please be advised that there is going to be an instance of child abuse in this chapter. While it is not very graphic, it's still pretty unpleasant. I also updated the tags accordingly.

Saint Jude is the patron saint of lost and desperate causes.

Less than a week before Christmas and Billy was fucking panicking.

He had been invited to Benny's Christmas dinner. Billy had been so dumbfounded by the invitation that he found himself agreeing to it, before even realizing what a fucking huge mistake that would be. Benny's surprised little smile in response had put a fucking stop to any attempt at Billy taking his word back. When Hammond went back to his office, Lennie had come by the car that Billy had been working on since that morning and had clapped the teen on his shoulder in acknowledgment before returning to his work. That, more than anything else, had let Billy know how much the invitation and his acceptance meant for Benny. He'd wondered why it was so important – Benny didn't need him, but Billy really needed Benny, a tough pill to swallow for a person that had always so self-sufficient.

It spurred a deep desire in Billy to do the right thing by Benny, because Billy Hargrove had never had someone in his life who actually expected good things from him – he was lying, his mom had been such a person but she had been dead for the past ten years and time and Neil Hargrove had ensured to erase most of her good work on Billy. Anyway, going to Benny's Christmas dinner meant that Billy would officially meet Benny's girlfriend, Tamara Coleman.

While they had never met in person, Tamara had been the one to ensure that Benny gave the right hand-me-downs to Billy and sometimes she was packing extra lunch so Benny could share with him (well, for Billy it was mostly an early dinner but he was glad when this happened because it meant not having dinner with his father). Tamara was a kindergarten teacher. She'd been together with Benny for the past three years. Billy didn't want to mess things up. And going there on Christmas Day meant that he would need to bring gifts for the both of them. While Billy had had no problems with picking one for his boss, Tamara was a totally different story. Which was why he was fucking panicking at the moment.

God, doing the right thing was so fucking exhausting!

Billy pinched his nose and tried to think of any other person that might help him with this. Carol, Tommy's girlfriend, was out of the question – too freaking dumb for anything useful – and he didn't know any other girls that might help him with this without wanting something in return. For a wild moment, he thought that he might be able to ask advice from Mrs. Wheeler, but that woman would eat him alive – while there had been times in his life when he would have enjoyed that, the simple thought of it now made him shudder.

He stared at Max's door, waiting for a desperate moment of inspiration. Billy had never had a problem with fucking girls in his desperate attempts to hide who he truly was (like Vicky and Tina) or charming them to obtain information (like he did with Mrs. Wheeler). But when it came to actually care about what they were interested in, he had found himself incapable of that. He was vexed to see that he was unable to find a solution by himself.

The silence of the house sounded oppressive for once. Neil was still at work and Susan was visiting a friend so he and Max were left to fend off for themselves. They had dinner together and for once the quietness between them hadn't been icy or full of incriminations; she even helped him clean after, so that was always a plus. They both retreated to their respective rooms to finish their homework and Billy had listened to *Ride the Lightning* twice going through various options of gifts for Tamara before he sighed in defeat and decided to ask the midget about it.

He squared his shoulders, manning up, and knocked respectfully, trying not to sigh too hard. This was going to go horribly wrong, he could fucking feel it.

“What?” She snapped at him as she opened the door wide enough for her whole body to come into view. She was dressed in her green pajamas, her hair fluffy and messy, and she looked like such a kid that for a moment Billy felt sick to his stomach to remember the way he had been treating her.

“I need your help,” he mumbled, caught off guard by the sudden pang of regret.

She promptly slammed the door shut in his face, shouting obnoxiously, “Go to hell!”

“Fucking hell, Maxine!” He yelled back and punched the door twice, before realizing that the familiar anger got a hold of him again. He brought his fisted hand to his mouth and bit hard on his knuckles in a feeble attempt to calm down. He took several deep breaths before he allowed himself to knock again, softer this time.

“Please, I really need your help,” he said keeping his voice steady.

Several heartbeats later, the door opened slowly to reveal Max peering curiously at him from under her long eyelashes. She crossed her arms and the gesture would have packed a meaner punch if she hadn't been dressed in those pajamas, her naked feet poking from under the longish sweats.

“What do you want?”

“What do you think I should get Benny's girlfriend for Christmas?” he went straight to the point. The slightly surprised furrow of her eyebrows was the only sign that she didn't expect that question precisely. He barged on, aware that he was babbling but he was too nervous, “Look, I want to make a good impression and I am not good at picking up presents for ladies. So can you just help me come up with an idea so that my boss doesn't murder me at work for offending his girlfriend or something?”

She looked at him clearly conflicted. Since the Snowball dance, things hadn't exactly been nicer between them but for once he had found himself to be under his step-sister's scrutiny and not her hate. Something must have transpired that night because she had been less vocal about her hate for him and she would even grunt in acknowledgment at him every once in a while.

Like a bug under microscope, Billy stood there waiting for her reply.

"I need to pick up a present for Will and Joyce this Saturday," she carefully answered at last. "They are the last on my Christmas list. If you meet me at the mall, I guess I can help you with that."

"I'll speak with Benny to let me leave a couple of hours earlier, then," he added quickly. "Thank you."

She nodded in answer wearily as if she wasn't sure whether she had taken the right decision in helping him out, then closed the door with a soft click, keeping an eye on him until the last moment. Billy stood there another few seconds before he decided he looked like a moron and returned to his room trying to forget about the embarrassment of asking his little step-sister for help.

The rest of the week was spent in relative silence as it was the last week before the winter holidays, school time passing obnoxiously slow, while time at work seemed to move faster. Though he and Harrington weren't on chatting terms yet, both of them had started to nod at each other on the hallways, bringing much confusion to the gossiping masses who had been very much entertained by the conflict between the two kings of Hawkins High.

On the basketball court, when on the same team, they moved like a well-oiled machine, much to the chagrin of Tommy and the other boys. There was a certain sort of calm, of imperturbability about Harrington that fascinated Billy – nothing seemed to touch Harrington, like all the petty things that happened during high school were meaningless because he had gone through worse things. Billy stayed awake at night and wondered what those things might be, what had changed in King Steve to make him grow up. He had the same weariness that Billy carried on his shoulders perpetually.

Also, since Harrington started to use Billy's move, he was a killing machine on the court. Billy could definitely see why Harrington had ruled over the masses for so long.

It had taken four days for Billy to gather enough courage to tell Benny with a faked air of nonchalance about his discussion with Harrington over pondering just what the hell was wrong with a transmission in a Buick. He sat there, shoulders slumped as he told Benny the story how he schooled Harrington about true music (Benny rolled his eyes and mumbled something which sounded close to Fucking kids these days) and about his agonizing apology (Benny had listened to that with a slightly amused twitch of the lips, which Billy suspected was only fair).

"So basically, what you're saying is that you high-tailed before he could even answer," Benny said, staring uselessly and fidgeting with other parts around the transmission. He threw out a look around the garage but Lennie hadn't come back from the bank yet.

"I didn't high-tail, fuck you very much," Billy snapped and looked over Benny's shoulder to the said transmission. "I manfully and *strategically* retreated before Harrington kicked my ass in retaliation."

"You know very well that he wasn't going to kick your ass." Benny glanced at him over his shoulder. "You were scared that he wasn't going to forgive you."

"Shut the fuck up, I wasn't scared. You were scared!" Billy almost swallowed his tongue at the lameness of his own words. He really was turning into a fucking pussy. It was such a bad come back that he had to roll his eyes at himself.

"Great come back there, Hargrove," Benny snickered.

"I am growing soft and this is all your fucking fault, Hammond," Billy said through gritted teeth.

"How the hell is that my fault?" Benny's eyebrows reached almost his hairline.

"You come with all these shit theories of actively make amends and

apologize directly,” Billy huffed and pulled at his hair hard. “It’s so fucking difficult.”

“If it wasn’t difficult, everybody would do it,” Benny answered at last and turned to face Billy, leaning over the opened hood. “It’s not a sign of weakness to ask for forgiveness, especially if you don’t get the answer that you’re looking for. I don’t care what other people say. And you’re the toughest little shit I know.” He patted Billy’s shoulder affectionately. “You just have to stick to your guns and do whatever is right.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mother Theresa.” Billy replied just to be obnoxious but didn’t jerk out from Benny’s grasp. “Also, could you stop with the short jokes, Andre the Giant? I can only bear so much before I must quit on principle alone.”

“It’s not my fault that you didn’t eat your goddamn veggies when you were little, Hargrove,” Benny smirked and looked back at the goddamn transmission. “I’ll have to leave this one with Lennie. I have no clue what the hell is wrong with it.”

“Well, he’s the expert around here anyway,” Billy said and quickly dodged a playful swat from Benny. “By the way, can I leave earlier on Saturday? I need to finish some presents for Christmas and since my boss is an asshole that wants me to work on Christmas Eve, I need to go this weekend.” Billy looked away. “Max said she’d come with me.”

“Who am I to deny your bonding time with your sister? Go, young grasshopper, spread your wings and be done with your Christmas presents.”

“I can’t be a grasshopper and spread my wings at the same time, dipshit, but thanks.”

“Honestly, the younger generations do need some goddamn manners,” Benny chuckled and winked at Billy.

It took Billy another hour to realize that he hadn’t corrected Benny when he referred to Max as his ‘sister’.

By the time Saturday rolled in, Billy was pretty much done with everything and just wanted to finish with the shopping so that he could go home, take a shower and sleep till Monday morning. Max was waiting for him at the food court, slurping from a red cup and generally looking out of place. He still hadn't found out what had happened that night at the Byers place, why Harrington had had with him a nail bat and why his sister had been there with all the little freaks. But something instinctual warned him that precisely those events had led to Max looking tougher and more aware of her surroundings. Perhaps even gave her the courage to stand up to Billy.

She noticed him immediately and taking one last sip from the plastic cup, she stood up, threw it away and made her way to him.

"Sorry I am late," he said as soon as she came within the hearing shot. She nodded curtly and made him follow her to a shop on the ground floor, where they spent the next half an hour deciding between colors and shades of blue and green and pink. In the end, they decided to go on an elegant scarf with swirls of blue and green and Billy even splurged on another one for Susan when he realized that he hadn't bought her anything for Christmas and his father wouldn't let that go away easily. Max coveted her words, but Billy appreciated her being there for him and he didn't want to screw things up with her.

Thus he kept his mouth shut and even ignored *Call me Ann's* smile at the cash register, for once not interested in playing his role. Although his stomach grumbled, he made himself wait for Max while she picked up presents for whoever she needed to pick up presents for. He was quite happy with his purchase and he had bought himself a coffee while Max studied different types of acrylics and colored pencils because apparently, this guy Will liked drawing very much.

By the time they made their way to the Camaro, Billy was in deep need of a cigarette. The crisp December wind did nothing to improve his mood. As soon as they got into the car, Billy started the engine and turned the heating on, letting Max warm up as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. He cracked his window open just a little and let the smoke get out, following its path with his eyes for a moment.

Max didn't say anything, simply staring out on her window so Billy turned on the radio, *The Chain* from The Fleetwood Mac filling up the car. Billy bet Harrington loved shit music like this one. He started up the engine and drove off.

They still had a few more miles before arriving home when Max muttered quietly, "Steve told me that you apologized to him. The night of the Snowball dance." The hair on the back of his neck stood up, a cold sweat breaking on his skin. He gripped the steering wheel tighter, knuckles turning white. He readjusted his position in the driving seat a few times before his eyes flickered to his right.

"Harrington has a big fucking mouth," he gritted through his clenched teeth, hating the vulnerable feeling. The fact that they all seemed to talk about him made him absolutely sick to his stomach. He must have been the big bad wolf to all of them, to those fucking nerds because he had been the asshole to threaten them, to beat the shit out of their babysitter or whatever the fuck Harrington was for them.

"Yeah, sometimes he's annoying like that," she agreed, surprising the hell out of Billy. She looked down, her feet shuffling a little. "Why didn't you apologize to me too? I should have been the first one on your list. You think that skateboard is enough?" A little venom sipped through every word, but mostly there was enough sorrow in her voice to make him cringe. Make amends, be honest, he repeated like a mantra in his mind, but it wasn't fucking easy. Who the fuck in the world enjoyed facing his mistakes time and time again and admit their wrong-doing?

He ran his fingers through his hair and grabbed another cigarette from his pack. He took a long drag before he even considered an answer.

"Because it would never be enough. An apology, I mean," he added softly when she finally dared to look back at him. "Not that my apology to Harrington should be sufficient either. But with you things are different. I've been a dickhead with you for a fucking long time now and I don't think that a sorry would help the matters. Honestly, Max, I think you'll never forgive me."

“So what? You're not going to even try?” She was burning with righteous fire, just like that night at the Byers place when she drugged him and almost took his manhood away. She was facing him, chin lifted and lips pursed, brave in a way Billy had never been.

He wanted to be frank with her, tell her that he was scared that she was going to say no to him, that she would be the exception to the rule and she wouldn't forgive him just like Benny warned him that might happen. However, he wanted to be as brave as she had been when she took the decision to open this conversation with him so he pulled the car on the side of the road and stopped the engine.

He flicked the cigarette outside then turned his attention to his sister who watched him unwaveringly.

“Are you going to kick my ass now?” She asked him softly and the question was like a knife to his gut. For a moment, the pain felt real and he flinched back, pressing his back against the door, a movement that Max contemplated in abject astonishment. He couldn't condemn her words, though, could he? Most of their interactions since coming here to Hawkins had been tinged with anger, bitter resentment and hate. He swallowed audibly a few times before deciding to open his mouth.

“What I am about to say doesn't leave this car, Max,” he said in a hoarse voice. He cleared it a few time before adding, “I mean it. I don't want you to tell your nerds or Harrington or anyone else. This stays between us, is that clear? Do I have your word?”

“I promise,” she answered immediately, exuding confidence. Like she'd be strong enough to carry a bit of Billy's weight on her skinny shoulders like she could be easily entrusted with Billy's darkest secrets and God, his soul ached viscerally for her. How had it come to this?

“Dad beats me,” he blurted out and pressed his hands on his thighs, looking down like a fucking pussy, but he lacked the courage of staring into her eyes when spewing all this bullshit. “It started after mom died, long before he brought you and Susan in our lives. When I was little, it was mostly just words and a push here and there, but as I grew up, it progressed to fists and slaps and fucking intimidation

tactics. That night when you and Susan came to pick me up from the emergency room? It was dad that put me in the hospital.” He dug his nails into the rough material of his jeans when he heard her shaky breathing. He bit his lip hard and pressed harder into the meat of his jeans as he dared to glance at Max.

“The reason why I haven't asked for your forgiveness yet, Max, is not because I think that fucking skateboard was enough, though until Benny opened my eyes, I kind of hoped it would be.” He tried to smile wobbly at her, but his lips refused to twitch. “Here's the thing. I did to you what dad did to me. To a lesser degree, but still, I did it. And I thought if dad came one day and asked for my forgiveness, I'd tell that asshole to fuck off, stick his apologies where the sun don't shine and rot in hell for all I care. So then I thought you'd be entitled to tell me the same if I ever came to apologize.” Billy sucked in a deep and shaky breath, “So no, Max, I'm not going to ask for your forgiveness. Not now anyway. I don't think I fucking deserve it, even if you'd give it.”

“Jesus Christ, Billy!” She looked absolutely gutted not only by his stunning openness but also by the terrible truth that she had uncovered. Also, for the record, Billy wanted to stipulate that his sister most definitely was not a pretty crier. She wrung her hands a few times before she wiped her tears away and bodily pulled Billy into the mother of all hugs. “If you tell anyone I did this, asshole, I'll club you with Harrington's bat,” she said fiercely, but all the threat rushed out of her words as she pulled harder at Billy when she realized that he wasn't hugging her back. Hesitantly, as if she was made out of the most fragile material, he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her, trying to keep some distance between them.

“Is this alright?” He muttered brittle around the edges, ready to break into a thousand pieces.

“More than alright, dipshit,” she answered.

“We were having a moment and you ruined it, Maxine,” he joked into her hair.

“I know, but we're both shit at this sort of things.”

"You know this is awkward as hell, right?" He mumbled after a while.

"Embrace the awkwardness because there'll be more to come." She patted his back a few more times before she finally let go of him and wiped at her remaining tears, her smile wobbly but true. "I kind of suspected that Neil does something to you. He's not as subtle as he'd like himself to be." She swallowed a few times, her shoulders hunched. "Do you think he might do that to me one day?"

"Fucking hell, no, Max! Never!" Billy took out a cigarette and lit it up. He kept it between his plump lips in an attempt to hide how much his hands were shaking, how much this conversation was taking out of him. But here was the thing: he wasn't sure that he told the truth. Because the thing with Neil? Yeah, Billy totally saw him fucking capable of starting on Max in a year or two, especially because she was strong-willed and Neil Hargrove hated people who had a mind of their own. He couldn't manipulate them as much he wanted. Susan was going to have to grow a fucking spine and fast because there was no telling what was going to happen once Billy was out of the house. The scenario was bleak, but at least Max had her real father that she could go back to if things came to worst.

Billy slumped further into his seat and settled on a half-truth, "He does that to me because he fucking hates me for something that I can't change."

"Is it because you like boys?" Billy literally froze, staring at his sister with wide eyes, his mouth slightly opened in shock. Max blushed heavily and looked down and away. "The walls weren't that thick back in California," she stammered out an explanation, "and I heard Neil calling you once a 'faggot' so I asked Ruben – do you remember Ruben from across the street? - yeah, he told me what it meant and said that it wasn't a nice word to use."

Billy pushed his body forward until he dug his chest painfully into the steering wheel and pressed his forehead on his crossed forearms, the cigarette now dead between his lips. He opened his lips slightly and the cigarette dropped to the floor. His mind was entirely blank. An odd buzzing sound rang in his ears. Max's distress was palpable, but when she gently pressed her hand on his shoulder in comfort, he

couldn't bear it and jerked away.

“Fucking lay off, Max, for a second!” He snarled, taking shaky deep breaths in the futile attempt to calm his racing heart. “Just lay off for a second,” he repeated through gritted teeth like a cornered wild animal. A wounded wolf whose pack had decided a long time ago he wasn't worth shit.

For all he threw the word in Hopper's face, hoping to make the man disgusted enough with him to leave him the hell alone, Billy was absolutely gutted that Max knew now the truth. He thought for a moment to lie and say that Neil Hargrove was just a fucking scumbag who liked to throw the worst words at him even before Billy had known what they fucking meant – and faggot was definitely one of his father's favorite words, even before Billy realized he was one. Did he like to learn? He was a faggot. He enjoyed going to the beach with his mom and have her read poetry to him? He was a faggot. Oh, Neil Hargrove had a way of twisting words to make him feel like a nothing. *To be a nothing.*

However, what Neil had never taken into account was that one day his son might not want to be a 'nothing' into the eyes of his adoptive sister (though still not in name and boy, was Billy happy for that as Neil Hargrove sure as hell didn't deserve Max). Billy was so tired of hiding, he craved for sharing this with a person that might not judge him for that, therefore, hopeful and hesitant, he peered from above his right arm to Max and nodded.

“Yeah,” he whispered, “I'm a fucking fag and that's why Neil hates my fucking guts.”

Max tilted her head, appraising Billy. She clasped her hands into her lap but looked steady at him and said, “I won't pretend that I get it, but I don't think it's disgusting or anything.” She blushed again and licked her lips before adding, “I don't think *you're* disgusting. You're still the same mouth breather that I knew and used to hate. And no, I won't say anything to anyone, asshole.”

Billy smiled softly, his eyes glistening in the dark. He could feel the burden of unshed tears and had to distract himself quickly. So he extended his arm and ruffled Max's hair, reveling into her outraged

squeak.

“Max,” he said tenderly afterward, ignoring her playful glare, “you’re the best person I’ve ever known.” He sighed and rubbed his eyes, pretending to be just tired, a poor attempt at dispelling the magic of this conversation, but he could only handle so many emotional conversations within a single day. “And what the fuck is a mouth breather? Another word from your nerdy friends?”

“They are not nerdy,” she huffed and crossed her arms in front of her in mock-indignation. “Besides laugh it up all you want, asshole, but I know most of your classes are advanced. Don’t even go there!”

“Yeah, let’s add this to the pile of things we’re so not going to talk about with anyone else.” Billy bent and picked up the half-smoked cigarette. He lit it up and his eyes flickered back to his sister. “I’m serious, Max, not a fucking word to anyone, especially - “

“Yeah, I know especially to my nerdy friends. Got you!” She pulled the seatbelt back on. “But you should consider telling someone about Neil. Maybe I can talk to Sheriff Hopper for you.”

“Nope, absolutely not!” Billy ran his fingers through his hair and bit his lip. This was precisely the fucking reason why he never told anyone about Neil. Pity and *hey let’s tell someone* advice. “Besides, Hopper knows. Why do you think he brought me home? Why do you think he found me a job?”

“Isn’t there anything anyone can do?”

“Nope, not until I’m eighteen anyway.”

“This is bullshit.”

“I know, but there’s nothing much I can do.” Billy started the engine. “But not a fucking word to anyone. And tell Harrington to keep his mouth shut, too.”

“I know, I know, if I don’t do as ordered, my ass is grass or whatever, blah blah blah,” Max replied but her words lacked the usual maliciousness that had been staple for most of their interactions since they had moved to Hawkins. “You aren’t as intimidating as you think

you are, especially after I saw you drugged and with a nail bat between your legs." She grinned at him a little maniacally.

"You're fucking scary when you want to be, Mad Max," Billy gulped and she actually cackled.

"See that you remember that, my friend."

"Your friend now, eh?"

"Yeah, well, on your way there anyway," she said as the last rays of the sun died in her hair, "for, you know, when I actually forgive you. But you're not there yet, so I'll continue to call you asshole." She frowned again at him, speaking in a tighter voice now, "But I need you to apologize to Lucas and the rest of my friends. But especially Lucas. You really frightened him that night."

"I thought that you might say that," Billy acknowledged but this time didn't check on her. He fought the urge to squirm again in the driver's seat like a twelve-year-old. "Is it really important to you?"

"Yes," her answer came without any hesitation. "I need to know this is real." *That you aren't lying to me* was so heavily implied, she might have just about come out and said it.

"Okay," he agreed at last. "But I need to do it in my own time if that's okay with you." She accepted his condition by nodding softly.

They spent the rest of the drive in silence. For once the reassuring purring of the Camaro didn't do anything to dispel the bitter taste left in his mouth by the whole discussion. While he was more than thrilled to have had an honest conversation with Max and to see her actually capable of offering her forgiveness one day, the fact that she had knowledge of his most feared secrets made him sick to his stomach. This sense of vulnerability was offensive, especially to a person like him that never had the chance of leaning on someone for support, who always kept everything close to his heart.

He was so queasy just at the thought of it that he could barely touch his dinner that night, although he had been famished. He listened on repeat *Houses of the Holy* and smoked almost a pack of cigarettes

overwhelmed by this frightening feeling of being completely vulnerable. It was enough that his father was making him feel that way. To know now that Max was privy to his darkest secrets made him crawl out of his skin.

He dug under the bed for the small bottle of whiskey that he had managed to smuggle into the house. He took several large gulps from it. The soft light of his lamp did nothing to appease his tensed nerves. He tried to think of Harrington and what the boy was doing at that time of night – most likely moping over that Wheeler bitch – but it didn't help either. Billy hated weakness and had cultivated invulnerability as a shield, his secrets had been his own. But they were no longer his own now. While Hopper had accidentally stumbled into Billy's secrets and Benny had found out part of them, Billy had chosen to offer them to Max on a silver platter.

He extended his hand and switched off the lamp. The darkness pulled tighter around him like a physical manifestation of his dark thoughts, the insecurity of whether he had taken the right decision in confiding in Max or not making him sink further and further inside his head. He was going to fuck it up. Sooner or later, he was going to fuck it up and all Benny's pretty words would turn out empty.

And Billy would be left alone to pay the price.

~O~

In Billy's experience, the most peaceful mornings were the most dangerous in the Hargrove household. This sort of mornings would sneak upon Billy like silent cats, prowling for their next victim, deadly in their attacks. And the worst thing that one such victim could do would be to think they could escape.

Billy could still remember a quiet June morning when he had thought that he was going to the beach but ended up staying in bed and caring for a bruised jaw. He could still remember the warmth of the sun on his skin as he laid on the floor in the kitchen, unable to get up. The shock of the unexpected hit and the throbbing ache had left him breathless and had weighed him down. He had stayed there for the best part of that late morning, while his father had kept on drinking his coffee and reading his newspaper at the table.

Billy's biggest fucking mistake that particular Sunday morning?

To get complacent around Neil Hargrove.

The silence was ominous when Billy had finally managed to wake up. Sporting a massive headache from the whiskey and the too many cigarettes from the previous night, he hadn't realized how still the house was when he went to the bathroom. Had he realized from the very beginning that he had been left alone with Neil, he would have at least prepared himself for what was about to come.

But as such, he washed his face and brushed his teeth and avoided to look in the mirror, afraid to see his disheveled bed hair. He went back to the room and changed into a pair of grey sweats and a large t-shirt with a few holes under the armpit. He kept putting off throwing it because the material was soft from too much washing and made him feel comfortable.

He got out of his room and beelined for the kitchen in search for a fresh cup of coffee. The first bad sign, that his muddled brain had registered anyway, was a combination of a soundless living-room – usually in the mornings, Max loved to watch something on TV, whether cartoons or TV shows – and an even quieter kitchen where his father was reading his newspaper. As soon as Billy entered the kitchen, Neil Hargrove watched his son from above the newspaper, a frigid sort of giddiness in his eyes. Instantly a cold shiver trickled down Billy's spine, his heart suddenly heavy.

“Good morning, sir,” he greeted respectfully as his instinct screamed at him to leave, just get the fuck out of the house, grab the keys to the Camaro and run.

“Good morning, Billy,” his father answered agreeably and Billy's hair stood up. Oh yeah, it was definitely a fucking trap. Shakily, he reached for a cup because it was definitely too late to get out of the kitchen now. “Though I would say,” his father pursued the subject like a hunter surrounding the prey, smelling the blood, “that it had been morning when Susan and your sister woke up. Now it's practically noon.”

“Yes, sir, I'm sorry,” Billy mumbled, mustering as much respect as he

could put in that answer. "I was feeling under the weather yesterday and couldn't sleep too much last night." How much he fucking hated the way his voice stammered, the deep fear trapped in his belly, making him feel weak and meaningless.

"Yes, your sister mentioned something." Neil folded the newspaper and Billy gulped. There was no other way to describe the dread that coursed through his veins. Deceptively calm, his father stood up and came close to the counter. He took the sugar out of the cupboard and asked Billy amiably, "Sugar?"

"No, thank you, sir." Billy could barely breathe, hunched completely into himself.

"My, how respectful you are!" His father poured some sugar into his own coffee. He took a sip of it, watching Billy above the rim of the mug, his gaze cold and assessing and it made his son sick. Billy couldn't breathe – his stomach had plummeted completely. He was on the precipice, struggling to breathe, but all oxygen must have left the fucking room because there was no way he could make his lungs expand and take some goddamn air in.

His father set the mug on the counter and looked at Billy speculatively.

The slap came so abruptly that Billy didn't even register the terrible hollow sound it made. He immediately lost his balance and tried to grab onto something which incidentally was his father's body, but Neil Hargrove slightly turned to the right, watching with crude satisfaction the way his son hit the corner of the table. Bracing himself against the impact, Billy turned at the last minute and hit the corner of the table with his left shoulder, falling at last over the chair that was there.

"What the hell did we talk about, boy?" His father sneered and rolled his shoulders, before bending and picking up Billy by the t-shirt like a rag-doll. "Respect! How many times do I have to teach you this lesson? In this house, we *respect* the meal hours and you'll *respect* Susan and Max by being here next time. Do you understand that?" Neil shook him a few times and Billy groaned dazed and in pain. "I didn't hear that, boy."

“Yes, sir,” he whispered, blood dribbling down his chin. Fucking Neil must have cracked his lip.

“Good.” Neil abruptly let him go and checked his watch. Billy barely managed to find his footing. “Now clean up this mess. I have to go and pick something up for Susan. I'd better find you home when I get back.”

“Yes, sir.” He fucking hated these words so much, he never wanted to hear them ever again in his life.

Billy stared at his father's back as the man left the room. He heard the front door open and close soon after, but Billy still hadn't moved, standing rock still in the middle of the kitchen. The feeble rays of sun that penetrated through the window caressed his right knee and his hands shook hard as another late morning came into his mind. And another and another.

His heart was heavy, head full of cotton. He looked around the kitchen until he finally rested his eyes on the phone. Three steps and a half and he was there. He took the receiver in his hand and listened to the tone. He dialed the first three numbers before he changed his mind and put the receiver back on the fork. It was stupid. No one was going to come and save him. He was alone.

As always.

He didn't cry. He was no fucking pussy and anyway, he had shed enough tears to last him a fucking lifetime and then some. He pulled up the chair and aligned the table. He turned to the sink and washed his chin and lip with mechanical gestures, pressing on the lip with a paper towel, ensuring that he wouldn't leave any evidence of what had occurred. Then he made himself some toast and drank his coffee.

He hummed one Metallica song after another, keeping his mind carefully blank. When he was finished, he washed the dishes, including his father's mug to be on the safe side. He checked to make sure that everything was where it should be.

This was nothing. This was just another fucking morning in the life of Billy fucking Hargrove.

He spent most of Sunday in bed, sneaking out every once in a while to the bathroom to get a towel and use it as a cold compress for his aching shoulder. Luckily, Max had gone with her friends to the arcade and Susan had always avoided Billy if she could. So he spent most of the day stewing in the well-known anger – oh, how bitter-sweet and familiar its taste was – and listening to Metallica over and over again. In the evening, he managed to convince Max (who had come to check up on him) that he was coming down with something but he'd feel better in the morning. He had hidden his face under the blanket to avoid her questions and pity, pretending to cough every once in a while. He fell asleep shortly after she left, still too angry and too goddamn tired to do anything else.

But by next morning, the anger was boiling through his veins, pressing at his seams, making him feel brittle and ready to fall apart. The fear that Max knew his secrets now and she could use them against him, the resentment that no matter what he'd do, his father would never be happy with him, and the sudden realization that he was changing, that his old coping mechanisms (drinking and smoking and listening to angry music – as enraged as him, maybe more) didn't work anymore pushed him to his limits. He was so done with asking people forgiveness and making amends. Fuck this bullshit! He didn't need anyone. Where were all these people when he needed them?

Fuck them! Fuck them all!

There's was only one person that he could blame for this shit. Benny with his fucking useless bullshit that left Billy powerless when faced with all these people. Benny with his active make amends crap that left Billy depleted of every resource that he had. His walls were fucking crumbling and they had been the only thing keeping him alive all these years. Not other people.

He had forgone his coffee and breakfast, too bitter and furious to even attempt at sitting still. Everyone in the house was asleep in the still dark morning. He drove to the garage constantly drumming his hands against the steering wheel, smoking and playing the music too loud for that hour, especially on Christmas Eve. By the time he reached the garage, his fury had reached whole new levels. As soon

as he got out, he went straight to Benny. His boss was just opening the garage and was about to say *good morning* when Billy came tight into his space and pushed hard against his chest. Whether from shock or from the unexpected recklessness of the gesture, Benny stumbled backward, but caught himself rather quickly. That pissed off Billy even more.

"Hey!" His boss shouted. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"*You!*" Billy hollered, hands fisted, ready for a fight, back in pain and heart shredded. "You with your fucking make amends, with your fucking ask for forgiveness. Nothing changes! You said that things would get better but *nothing changes!* Nothing ever does!"

"Billy," Benny said kindly, his eyes still widened in surprise, but less intent on kicking his ass.

"No! No more fucking Billy! No more fucking around!" Billy was about to crumble, he could feel it, a prickly almost painful sensation under his skin, and it horrified him because he had never been so vulnerable. "I quit! I fucking quit and for all I care, you can tell the sheriff to fuck off and come arrest me. I don't fucking care anymore!"

He breathed hard, poison and hate mixing together into a powerful combination, self-righteousness burning through his blood like an old friend. He turned around ready to leave when Benny tried to stop him and grabbed him by the left shoulder. Instantly, Billy howled in pain and arched his back in an attempt to jerk away. Benny took his hand off immediately and Billy almost bent over this time, breathing hard through the nose, the whole garage resounding with his gasps of alleviated pain.

"Don't touch me!" He sneered at last as he spit on the floor. He glanced at Benny over his shoulder. His boss was ashen, his hands slightly raised in surrender, shoulders hunched in a poor attempt to make himself smaller and not threatening. Had he not been in agony, Billy would have laughed, the simple idea of Benny Hammond trying to make himself smaller preposterous in itself. However, not so deep down as he would have liked, Billy actually enjoyed the idea of it. He had forgotten how heady the rush was when he made people fear him, when he made people weary and insecure.

"What happened?" Benny asked him at last in a tone that suggested Billy was a feral animal and needed to be chained.

"Nothing happened!" Billy sneered, voracious in his need to hurt someone. His shoulder was on fire and his attempts at getting his breathing under control were futile. "Why does something have to happen? This is me, man. What you see is what you get. And I'm done playing by the rules. This almost got me killed. I didn't survive this long to stumble right at the end. I will survive this and once I turn eighteen, I'm done with Hawkins. I'm done with you all."

"So that's it then?" Benny's hard voice couldn't stop Billy in his tracks, but the next ones did. "I mean nothing to you, your sister means nothing to you."

"Yeah, that's right." Billy turned to face Benny Hammond one last time but was surprised to see the thoughtful look on Benny's face, eyes kind, and patient. So fucking patient and sad they were driving Billy up the fucking wall.

"So I guess I should say then that you mean nothing to me too. Right?" Billy recoiled upon hearing the words. It felt like someone sucked all life out of the room, like every breath that he would take from there on would be lost into a sea of silence. Benny shot him a calculating look.

"I knew that," Billy mumbled, proud of himself that he could still speak. There, at least the truth was out there in the open between the two of them.

"Of course, you also know that I was just wasting my time with you, that I knew from the very beginning that you'd end up like your dad," Benny continued merciless and Billy was shattering, well past the breaking point.

"Yeah," the word sounded cracked, a lifetime of sorrow. His eyes were blurry and he couldn't distinguish Benny's form anymore. But it didn't matter – it felt like Benny had taken a knife and had cut deep, exposing Billy's bones made of sorrow and ache and a visceral need that no one would fulfill. The crushing pain was pressing on his chest and every breath was agonizing.

The arm around him came out of nowhere, gentle and strong, careful around the shoulders. Billy looked down, a sob wrecking his back. And then another and then another, each sob like a repeated knife wound, each cut a little deeper. A warm hand squeezed tenderly the back of his neck, Benny's thumb a comforting presence just behind his ear. Billy had fought so hard against this. So hard and yet that one arm hug pulverized his defenses, leaving him open at last.

However, Benny wasn't done.

"Fuck your asshole of a father!" Benny's voice sent a cold shiver down his spine but he couldn't make himself look up. "Fuck him! I don't know what happened, what he did or said to you but fuck him. It's not your fault and it's not anyone else's. He's a piece of trash and I promise you one day he'll have it coming." Billy rested his forehead against Benny's chest as the man's other hand wrapped around him as well.

"I care about you, kid," Benny confessed, his voice choked up with emotion. "You are a fucking brave kid, far braver than I was at your age. Yes, you are," Benny insisted when Billy shook his head in answer. "You are. You are smart and brave and resourceful. By now, anyone else would have given up. But you still open up to other people. To me, to your sister, even that guy Harrington. That doesn't make you weak, on the contrary. It makes you a far better person than you give yourself credit for."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew me as I really am," Billy pressed his forehead into Hammond's chest, split open and raw. *If you knew I was a faggot*, he wanted to add but couldn't, because the comfort he was receiving was far more vital for him at the moment.

"I don't need to know all the things about you, Billy, to know who you really are," Benny answered and squeezed a little. "Do you think that I am perfect? That I didn't do anything wrong in my entire life? Don't forget I was in Vietnam. I killed innocent people, I've seen unspeakable things. I *did* unspeakable things." Benny hugged him lightly, giving Billy every chance to pull away but the teen just grabbed a fistful of his uniform and he held on. "You're not perfect, but that doesn't mean you don't deserve good things to happen to you."

“Dad hit me on Sunday,” he admitted at last and Benny shook for a moment with barely contained rage. “He hit me so fucking hard, I fell over the table and into a chair. My whole back is on fire.”

“Fucking asshole!” He drew another shaky breath before speaking again, “Do you need to be taken to the hospital?”

“No, I’ve had worse,” Billy mumbled and wiped his tears away. He slowly stepped aside and dared to look at Benny. His boss seemed gutted by the admission. “I don’t think I can do this much longer, Benny.”

“One day -” Benny began but had to stop and scratch his beard viciously. Billy thought amused that it must have been the equivalent of running his fingers through his hair. “One day,” Benny spoke again, this time a little more ferociously, “I promise you your father is going to get what he deserves.”

Billy nodded but looked down and away, incapable of telling his boss that he really didn’t think that day was about to come anytime soon, not that he cared. After yesterday, something irreparable had taken place between his father and him, and Billy knew it was the kind that would never heal. The way his mother’s death had taken away something vital with her too. He and his father had never been connected by much, but piece by piece, that relationship had been stripped bare. Billy hoped that in the end there would be nothing left linking him to that man.

“Did you have breakfast?” Benny asked abruptly and Billy shrugged.

“Didn’t feel like it.”

“Not even coffee?” His boss shook his head as he started to close the garage down again.

“Hammond, what are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Benny rolled his eyes. “I’m closing the garage so we can have breakfast.”

“But you’ll lose customers.”

“Fuck it, it's Christmas Eve. I don't even know why I bothered opening up. Besides, what customers?” Billy looked around then and indeed the street was empty as if all Hawkins was still hibernating, though it was quite late in the morning. “Come on, let's get some sweet hot coffee and some nice breakfast in our bellies, little one!” And just to be obnoxious, he ruffled Billy's hair.

“Watch the hair, Bigfoot! Seriously, man, I will kick your ass. I've learned a thing or two from Hopper, you know?”

“Yeah, yeah, who do you think taught Hopper those moves?” Benny laughed as they turned right and made their way towards Main Street.

“I fucking hate you!” But there was no venom when he looked at Benny and the giant man just smiled back.

“You fucking love me!”

“You wish, Magnum!”

“I'm wearing you down, Hargrove,” Benny said with a wink and opened the door to the diner, their laughter trailing after them. “I'm wearing you down.”

~O~

Billy peeled the shirt with small whimpers of pain that still escaped stubbornly through his bitten lips. His whole left side actually hurt worse than on Monday, the skin tight and hot upon touch. He stepped in front of the mirror and turned aside just enough to catch a glance over his shoulder and check the bruise, which had turned into an ugly shade of blue and purple, its middle a violent red. It had grown as well, bigger than his palm. Towards the middle of his lower back, there was another, a slightly less brutal one – a clear and red vertical line where the edge of the chair had dug into him, less painfully.

But as he looked away from the mirror, he caught a glimpse of the small and brown package that sat apparently innocently on his desk. He swallowed hard and ignored it in favor of pulling his jumper on.

He had chosen a black jumper with a blue thick line across his chest. He was aware that it made his eyes pop and his golden hair shined a little brighter and he would have definitely smirked at himself into the mirror had it not been for the pain in his back. And that goddamn package. He chose to use some hairspray to make his curls a little more defined, his silver earring shimmering brightly in the artificial light. The package still sat innocently on the desk, taunting Billy with its presence. He grabbed his watch and scanned himself in the mirror one more time, making sure that he looked good.

The package appeared so inconsequential. Inconsequential his ass!

For fuck's sake! He was acting like a fucking pussy, constantly checking up that goddamn cassette all the goddamn time. It had seemed like such a bad idea at the time, making Harrington a goddamn mixtape – the gesture itself could have been interpreted in so many ways. Also, he wasn't fucking sure how the guy might have appreciated such a gift. However, Harrington also tried to help him out by telling Max that he had apologized. Or maybe he just had a big fucking mouth and in that case, he really needed to shut up and find other ventures for him to explore because otherwise, Billy could kick his ass. Again.

Why the fuck did he make a mixtape for Steve fucking Harrington? Oh yeah, because in the end he had been convinced that the guy needed some goddamn lesson in true and awesome music.

So Billy did it.

In neat letters, he had written *This is what real music is all about, Harrington* then proceeded in selecting some of the songs that he had listened on repeat time and time again. And one tongue in the cheek kind of song because Billy was Billy and couldn't help himself.

Side A

1. Metallica – The Four Horsemen
2. Metallica – Fade to Black
3. Led Zeppelin – Black Dog
4. Heart – Barracuda
5. Anthrax – Soldiers of Metallic

Side B

1. Ac/DC – Night Prowler
2. Iron Maiden – Run to the Hills
3. The Ramones – I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend
4. Ac/DC – Back in Black
5. Joy Division – Atmosphere

Then he wrapped it in brown paper and had written *For S.H.* He had planned to give it to the guy when he dropped Max at the Byers place because apparently Harrington's parents were off somewhere again and King Steve had decided that it was a good idea to celebrate Christmas at his current rival who had stolen Wheeler from him. Honestly, Billy had no idea what went through Harrington's head at times, but hey, who was he to judge, considering that he had made a mixtape for a guy whom he had pummelled not long ago, but whom he liked so he had actually put a song entitled *I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend*. It was a shit song and did nothing for The Ramones' reputation, but he sure as hell liked to tease Harrington.

Now if only Billy found his fucking balls again and gave the goddamn tape to Harrington, that would be awesome. He rolled his eyes at his own reflection, then grabbed his leather jacket together with the presents for Benny and Tamara and picked the goddamn cassette as well. He worked fucking hard for it and it was going to reach Harrington, even if he had to shove it down his throat.

He switched off the lights and closed the door to his room. He went around the living-room and kitchen, ensuring that everything was closed and that his father wouldn't cause him more grief for some small shit that he hadn't noticed. The Christmas breakfast had been awkward enough with Max staring perplexed at Billy's cracked lip and Susan avoiding his eyes. His sister had tried to corner him to find out what happened, but Billy had managed to avoid her. They had shared presents like the fakest family in the history of ever.

Afterwards, Billy had counted the hours until Neil had left with Susan for dinner at one of her distant cousin's place or something. He hadn't cared about the details at the time other than the fact that he would be allowed to go to Benny's dinner and Max could go to the Byers' place and as long as they would be back in time, they should be fine.

"Max, I'm leaving without you, if you're not out in five minutes," he shouted as he switched off the light in the kitchen.

"Shut up, asshole." She was already in the hallway, putting her shoes on. "I'm ready, you don't have to shout."

"Well, Scrooge, let's hit the road then." He winked at her and opened the door for her.

"Yeah, my friends are the nerds." She rolled her pretty eyes at him and got into the car while he locked the door and checked it twice, before dropping his things on the back seat and got in the car as well.

"If you don't shut your smart mouth, I can't tell you how pretty you look this evening, Max." His sister blushed heavily and turned away but couldn't hide her lovely smile.

"Shut up, asshole," she mumbled. "You look good too," she added in between the guitar riffs from Iron Maiden.

Billy smiled softly. These simple conversations between him and Max improved his disposition tremendously, but he enjoyed, even more, the lack of awkwardness and iciness that the silences between them had kept for so long. For once the trip to the Byers place seemed shorter than usual, although, as he parked the car in front of the house, he realized that the house still gave him the creeps. Harrington's Beemer was already there, parked neatly next to the sheriff's car and his heart skipped a beat, as anatomically impossible as it fucking sounded.

"Listen, midget, I need a favor," he rushed on before Max could even grab the bag full of presents for just about everyone and their sucking mother.

"I'm not doing anything for you, if you keep calling me midget," Max huffed but pulled her hand from the door handle and scowled at him.

"Very well then, Mad Max," Billy snarked. He reached across for the cassette and gave it to Max. "Could you give it to Harrington? Please," he added as an afterthought.

"You bought him a present? Billy-"

"No, I didn't buy him a present," he grumbled as he lit a cigarette. "I made him a mixtape."

"You made him a mixtape," she repeated, her incredulity reaching new heights. "How's that better?"

"Don't turn it into something that it's not, Max." Billy took a long drag as he noticed that sheriff Hopper had appeared in the doorway to check on them. "Look, Max, when I apologized to him, we talked about music. Harrington's taste for music is for shit so I thought I'd school him on what he should really listen to. It isn't anything rude and I think he might actually enjoy it. So could you just give it to him?"

"Fine," Max spit the word out and gathered her things before grabbing the cassette. "But if he starts suddenly playing Metallica when he drops us home from the Arcade, I swear to God I'm going to kick your ass."

"You know you like it," Billy smiled, relieved to have gotten rid of the cassette. "Evening, Hopper. Or Merry Christmas!" He greeted the sheriff as he opened the door for Max and helped her with her things. Hopper's eyes narrowed as they zeroed on Billy's cracked lip but Billy just shook his head and Hopper nodded in understanding.

"Merry Christmas to you too, Billy," Hopper said amiably and took Max's bag. "Want to join us for a quick drink?"

"No, thank you," Billy said as he noticed wearily the other boys, who had come out to greet Max. They were talking miles a minute and he wondered briefly how Harrington could stand it. "I want to be on time to Benny's place. I have to make a good impression on Tamara."

"Good luck with that, kid." Hopper winced and Billy suddenly smelled something interesting.

"Care to share with the class?" He smirked and Hopper huffed annoyed.

"No, I think Hammond will make sure he shares enough embarrassing stories about me tonight. You have a Merry Christmas

now.” Hopper slammed the door shut and herded the loud kids into the house.

“You too,” he hollered and drove away.

This was going to be an interesting evening. He smiled like a shark in the darkness of his car. He needed to make Benny tell him as many interesting stories about Hopper as he could. He definitely needed some blackmail material. He thought for a moment about Harrington and the cassette but he shot that thought down straight away and stomped on it for good measure. He wasn't going to ruin this evening with meaningless what ifs.

Later on, he would drive back to pick up Max with a belly full of good food and heart full of laughter. On his back seat, there would be a Metallica t-shirt and an Iron Maiden one, the Born in the USA album (because Benny Hammond was a little shit), some books about mechanical engineering (because apparently Tamara had high expectations from him), a Christmas sock full of sweets and some warm socks (because apparently the winter in Hawkins was terrible after all).

Later on still, he would pick up Max and he'd watch Harrington, who looked at him from the doorway, eyes laser focused on him. He and Max would drive home in comfortable silence, too busy with their respective happiness and they'd think about how wonderful it had been to be away from their respective parents. They'd be happy to see the house still dark and they'd take their presents from the back seat and go to their rooms dreaming of another Christmas just like this one had been.

And later still, spread in his bed like a starfish, hands tucked under the pillow and listening to the soft noises of Neil and Susan coming home, Billy would think about how wonderful would have been to stay with Benny and Tamara and never return to this shit of a house ever again.

~O~

Springsteen blared from the small cassette recorder that Hammond had received as a Christmas present. Billy absolutely regretted giving

the guy that t-shirt because it seemed to have made him only more obsessed with the singer. By now, Billy knew most of the *Born in the USA* album – secretly, he actually liked some of the songs, especially *Dancing in the Dark* and *No Surrender* (had a special place for *I'm on Fire* too) but he wasn't stupid to mention that to Hammond; he would have been terribly obnoxious about it.

He was just humming along the verses of *I'm on Fire* when Lennie rapped his hand over the hood to grab his attention.

"Hey, Hargrove, you got a visitor," Lennie said in that husky voice of his. Billy was much dissatisfied with the fact that his scowling was wasted on Lennie's work boots.

"Fucking Christ, man!" He barked from under the car, aiming to sound loud and angry, but sounding like a brat. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"If I did, you'd already be dead, kid." Lennie actually chuckled, the bastard. "Like I said, visitor for you." Lennie and his dirty work boots disappeared from his line of vision making way to some terribly fancy black boots that Billy wouldn't be caught wearing them even dead. The sudden dread in the pit of his stomach couldn't drown the excitement.

"Is that you, Harrington?" He was aiming for sarcastic but coming out a little unsure. Billy feigned slamming his head against the car.

"How did you guess?"

"No one around here would be caught dead wearing those fancy boots," he grouched and got out from under the car. Harrington grinned at him in all his perfect hair-perfect clothes glory with his hand extended to help Billy get up. Billy looked at his hand then back at the unruffled appearance of Harrington and grabbed that hand smearing black grease all over it, watching his work with an unusual sense of satisfaction. However, Harrington just rolled his eyes at him and snatched Billy's rag from his pocket, cleaning his hand before giving it back.

"So what the hell are you doing here, princess? Slumming with us

terrible boys?" Billy looked around to see Benny watching him curiously from his office as Lennie was still bent over a Ford. "Missed me?" He grinned back at Harrington who shoved his hands back in his pockets and tilted his head just so.

"Yeah, I missed your trash talk too much, Hargrove," he replied, his lips twitching around the corners. "I needed someone to take me down a peg or two and who better to do that than the new King of Hawkins High?" Billy burst out laughing before he could even catch himself. He flushed slightly when he saw Harrington's answering warm smile. Even Lennie had looked up at that.

"Then you came to the right place, pretty boy. Lennie, I'm taking five," he hollered back and the old man just waved a hand in acknowledgment. "Come on, Harrington, let's have a cigarette."

They went to the back of the garage where they could watch the junkyard but have a chat in peace without those yuppies watching their every reaction. Billy needed to have a talk with Lennie and Benny being too goddamn nosey for their own good. He lit up a cigarette and then offered Harrington one who took it gratefully.

"So care to tell me why you're here, Harrington?" He said as they both took a long drag from their respective cigarettes.

"You can't give me a mixtape for Christmas, dickhead, without me having a word about it," Harrington said and Billy found himself blanching at the words. Perhaps sensing that he had said the wrong thing, Harrington followed quickly with, "I had to go and buy myself all Joy Division albums that I could find. Plus I ordered the Led Zepplin ones as well. Thanks for that, asshole."

"Aw, look at you, pretty boy, all grown up and listening to real music," Billy said full of satisfaction. "Well, someone had to save you from the terrible god-awful music you were listening to."

"You like Queen as well, asshole, stop pretending that you don't." Harrington ran his fingers through his hair and Billy's hand itched to do the same, itched just to touch those goddamn perfect locks and mess them up a little. "Also, for the record, you can take Metallica and Iron Maiden and whatever the other guys were called and shove

them up where the sun don't shine because I sure as hell won't be listening to that kind of crap."

"Careful, Harrington, you're talking shit about my favorite bands."

"If you're allowed to talk trash about my favorite bands, then I can do the same." Harrington stomped on his cigarette. "But what I think I'm trying to say is thanks, Hargrove, I appreciate the gesture."

"Don't mention it, Harrington." Billy side glanced at the other boy. "Seriously, don't mention it to anyone." Harrington nodded but didn't seem to listen much to Billy. He was staring into the distance at the junkyard like he had just remembered something terrible had happened there. It seemed to press from all sides on him as the teen hunched his shoulders and shuffled his feet a little. "Are you going to Nicole's party on New Year's Eve?" Billy found himself asking, horrified that he had asked at all.

"I'm not sure," Harrington turned his attention and Billy found himself drowning into those big brown eyes. There was something new in the way Harrington was looking at him all of a sudden as if he was discovering something new, something that he didn't know he could see before. It pushed under Billy's skin, scrapped raw of any defenses, just itching to grab that boy and fucking kiss the hell out of him. God help Harrington, but Billy wanted the hell out of him! His fire and the way he'd suddenly lit up, facing Billy like no one else had ever done. It really wasn't fair to finally find his equal and for that guy to be straight as a line. For fuck's sake!

"You should come, pretty boy," Billy goaded him as he pulled another cigarette out of the pack. "God only knows, man, you need some distraction. And besides, you might actually have fun."

"Are you going?"

"Yeah, don't have much to do on that day."

"Then I might see you there." Harrington looked down and away as if bracing for impact. "Also, I wanted to say thanks for the apology."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Billy heard himself saying,

voice distant, head full of cotton. Harrington tensed and glanced back at him wearily.

“Of course you don't,” he mumbled and took a step back. Without thinking, Billy grabbed his wrist and held on. Those goddamn doe eyes widened in surprise, weariness swelling up a little.

“Just don't,” Billy gritted through clenched teeth, but couldn't make himself let go.

“Don't what?” Harrington asked patiently. Billy pressed his lips into a thin line, biting his cheek.

“Just don't,” he pushed further, getting a little closer to the other teen. “I meant what I said,” he heard himself admitting. Harrington nodded seriously.

“I know you did. That's why I said thanks. I appreciate the gesture.” Harrington bit his lip before adding, “The sincerity of it.”

His gaze was steady, unperturbed, and Billy found himself lost in it. The air sudden cracked with electricity around them, pushing tiny prickles under their skin. His thumb moved back and forth inside Harrington's wrist. The entire moment washed over him in soothing waves of pure electricity. And by the marveled tilt of his head, Harrington seemed to feel it too.

“I need to go,” Harrington muttered reluctantly. “Dustin's mom asked me to drop him at the Wheeler's place.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, pretty boy.”

Harrington's eyes crinkled adorably (Billy was going to make himself puke but this guy really was too goddamn adorable for his own good) and said, “Let go then.”

Billy dropped his wrist like it was on fire. He straightened up his spine as Harrington gave him a small smile. “I'll see you at Nicole's party?”

“Yeah, yeah, see you there.” Harrington smiled one more time then left.

Billy returned back in the garage where Benny raised his eyes from his book, which Billy bought it for the prick for Christmas, a gesture he now regretted because his boss suddenly thought it was a book that Billy should read too. But he really didn't want to read Pirsig's work, thank you very much. Benny raised one eyebrow at him and smiled knowingly.

"Shut the fuck up, Hammond!" He shouted back in response, hiding quickly under the car that he was repairing before Harrington paid him a visit.

Benny just laughed and laughed and laughed.

~O~

The alcohol sang in Billy's veins and he was pleasantly buzzed. Lazily, he turned his head to the left and watched Nicole from under his eyelashes as the girl tried to find a way to drape herself all over him. He really hoped that she'd come up with a better idea because he'd sure as hell push her down if it came to that. He really wasn't in the mood for making small talk, that's why he was allowing Tommy yapping and yapping like an annoying little dog with zero fucking personality. He took another sip of his beer but not much. He didn't want to lose himself tonight, he wanted to be in control for when he got to see Harrington. *Blue Monday* was blaring throughout the house and he shook his head to the rhythm of it, but he hadn't cared much about the band after they changed their name and decided that this rubbish was better than what they played before Curtis died. Fuck, all the good rockers were dying far too fucking young.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Nicole bracing herself for the final move. He wasn't in the fucking mood, couldn't she fucking get that through her thick skull? He got up suddenly, swaying on his legs but more due to the abruptness of his gesture rather than the fact that he had too much to drink. They all stared as fucking sheep at him and Jesus fucking Christ, Harrington really had the nerves of steel because Billy wouldn't have made it a whole year without punching Tommy in his fucking face. He mumbled something about a cigarette and chose to ignore Tommy when he mentioned that he could do it inside the house.

The crisp December air slid on his shoulders like a wet blanket and Billy shivered, despite the fact that he had grabbed his coat on his way out. He lit his cigarette and took a long drag. It was the last day of the year and if someone would have told him last year that he would be spending his last day of 1984 in Hawkins, Indiana, surrounded by fucking useless people, but with a job under his belt and people that actually cared about him – though he could count them on the fingers of one hand – he would have punched their face in, then laugh it up. He glanced at his watch. Almost ten forty. Harrington wasn't going to show up.

The bitter taste of disappointment sat heavily on his tongue. Of course, Harrington had better things to do than spend his time with his former subjects. The song changed to *Should I Stay or Should I Go* and Billy laughed bitterly. Yeah, good point, The Clash. He really didn't want to stay here until midnight and get Nicole to shove up her clumsy tongue so far down his throat that he could still fucking taste her two days afterward.

“Am I dreaming or is that you, Hargrove?” Billy grinned as he turned to see Harrington with a cheeky smile on his plump lips. Personally, Billy thought it was a fucking disgrace that it had taken him so long to find out what a little shit Steve Harrington was.

“Yeah, it's me, don't cream your pants.” Harrington laughed and came closer. Billy's grin deepened. “I thought you weren't coming.”

“Well, I thought about it.” Harrington shrugged, casting a glance towards the noisy entrance. “This really isn't my scene anymore.”

“What's your scene then?”

“Fuck if I know, man,” Harrington said and maybe he had aimed for indifferent and funny, but it came out as lost and a little bitter. Billy drew closer to the guy, heart pounding a little louder. “What about you? Your adoring fans tired you out?”

“Nah, I just felt the need for a cigarette.” Billy took another long drag. “Though you can have your loyal subjects back if you want, King Steve. I don't know how you could stand Tommy and his lot for so long, man.”

"There weren't many interesting people in Hawkins back then," Harrington mumbled, shrugging a little. "Too late now to return them though, King Billy." A shiver ran down his spine, pleasure spiking up, and Billy definitely needed to look away because seriously, Harrington saying his name in that combination made warmth and lust pool down in his belly and he really wanted to be Harrington's friend, not scar him for eternity.

"Laugh it up all you want, princess, but they'd love to have you back in there." He flicked the remains of his smoked cigarette in the patch of the snow left in the garden. "Wanna go in?"

Harrington glanced at the door again, his shoulders a little slumped as if struggling with himself. It clicked then to Billy that Harrington didn't come to the party because Tommy invited him or because he wanted to see his former subjects. In a past life, his own arrogance might have made him think that Harrington had come to spend time with him, but it seemed to Billy for the first time that Harrington was a bit lost. Billy's eyes flickered to his mouth then away. He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away.

"Want to get out of here?" He could feel Harrington's eyes burning him. Billy braced himself to hear the mocking laugh.

"And go where?" The careful question made Billy slightly dizzy.

"I don't know," he spoke at last and took a deep breath. "We could drive around or go to the quarry and have a little party there. I don't know, man, but I don't want to start my new year by punching Tommy in the fucking face."

"Want to go to my place then?" Harrington watched him carefully with his big brown eyes, lips slightly parted and Billy really didn't need the shit. He was human after all, for fuck's sake. "My parents are gone until the third and I have plenty of booze to satisfy your delicate palate."

"Well, princess, why didn't you say that from the very beginning?" Billy wrapped his arm around Harrington's shoulders and slightly pushed him away from the door. "Lead the way, pretty boy. Did you drive here?"

“Yeah,” Harrington said, his face slightly flushed, but just as amused. “Want to go with my car or you're following me there?”

“I'll follow you there. I don't want to leave my car here. One of these fuckers will scratch it for sure or worse.”

“Alright. See you then, Hargrove.”

The absence of Steve's bony shoulders from under his arms felt almost like a physical punch. Billy watched Harrington walking further down the road where he had parked his car before he slid into his own. His hands shook slightly but he grabbed the steering wheel and took a deep breath. God, he really didn't want to fuck this up tonight. He would get to spend the first few hours of the new year with Steve fucking Harrington. The possibility hadn't even crossed his mind, even when he had known that Steve would join them at Nicole's party. He figured that at best, he would exchange a few pleasantries with the guy and drink a beer or two together before getting fucking wasted and maybe find someone willing enough to fuck with.

But there he was, parking his Camaro next to Harrington's Beemer in front of a rather fancy house, ready to drink and enjoy his company. Fucking hell! He smirked at Harrington as he got out of the car and the former king of Hawkins rolled his pretty eyes at him.

“Don't even think of fucking saying it, dipshit,” the teen said as he opened the door and led Billy in.

“I wasn't going to fucking say anything, pretty boy.” Billy followed Steve in and took his boots off when he noticed the guy doing the same. He turned his attention towards the surroundings and he had to laugh out loud. “But seriously, nice digs, man.”

“Yeah, yeah. Come on.”

Harrington led him into a large living-room with a fucking fireplace, where he could see the dying embers of what must have been an impressive fire. The living room itself was spacious with two large cream couches covered in pillows and aligned in an L shape to ensure that no matter where anyone would sit in the room, they'd be able to

have a good view of the TV. On one of them, there was still a pillow and a comforter thrown askew, a clear sign that Steve had spent there most of the evening and for some strange reason, that singular thought made Billy feel pretty good about himself.

Steve threw his coat on one of the armchairs and Billy looked away immediately because the guy was dressed in a blue jumper that made his shoulders look wider, while his waist slimmer. He followed suit by taking his coat off and throwing it casually over Harrington's.

“Man, do you ever know how to button up your shirts?” Steve's question grabbed his attention from the various memorabilia set in the corner of the room. Billy checked his blue shirt unbuttoned almost up to his belly button – he knew that it made his eyes even bluer, that's why he had picked it up, sick and tired of jumpers and flannel shirts. He turned around to see the other boy pulling out a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of wine. “Wine or whiskey, dipshit?”

“Whiskey is fine, pretty boy.” Billy crashed on the couch that Steve had vacated. “And to answer your question, princess, I can't button up my shirt when I look this good, right? I need to show the ladies what they're missing out on.”

“From what I heard, they're not missing on anything as you're more than generous with your own person,” Steve mumbled as he poured some whiskey in two glasses and grinned cheekily.

“Oh, are you jealous, pretty boy?” Billy took a sip of his whiskey and sighed contently afterward. “Yeah, this is the good shit, Harrington. Won't daddy dearest say anything about you drinking his precious whiskey?”

“Nope, I don't think he'll notice anyway.” Again, Billy had the distinct feeling that Harrington was bitter again, that there was something hiding just below the surface and that if he would just scratch it a little, he would discover what hides behind this King Steve persona. “I have some pizza leftovers and some Cheese N Crackers. Want Taco Cheese or Pizza Cheese?”

“Everything sounds good to me, Harrington.”

“Then wait here. I'll be right back.”

Billy stood up to switch on the TV as Harrington disappeared in the kitchen. There were pictures of Steve on the mantle as well – in some of them he was grinning, in others, he looked far away as if he hadn't wanted for his picture to be taken. There were just about as many pictures of Max around the Hargrove place as well, Billy showing in the only one from the wedding where all four of them were standing awkwardly and smiling coldly at the camera. The rest of the pictures that he had managed to salvage – of his mom and generally of their family before her death – were in a box under his bed.

“I found this as well,” Harrington came back in the room, almost crashing while waving a champagne bottle. Billy jumped to his aid and grabbed him by the arm to keep him steady. “Thanks for that.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn't want you to waste a perfectly good champagne bottle just because you're clumsy, Harrington.”

“Of course not.”

The coffee table was soon covered with junk food and booze and Steve spread himself on the other couch, both of them sipping from their glasses while watching mindlessly the TV. Billy didn't mind the silence – it was comfortable, covering them like a warm blanket. Billy poured himself another glass of whiskey and grabbed a cold slice of pizza. The pleasant buzz that he had going on back at Nicole's place had returned. He made sure to eat though because he realized that there was a very slim chance to have Harrington's company like this again, so he tried to make the best of it.

“How come you're not at the Byers place? Celebrating with your friends and everything?”

“How come you're not back to Nicole's place celebrating with your friends and everything?” Harrington snarked back, making Billy chuckle.

“Fair point, I guess.” He washed away the taste of cold pepperoni with another long sip of whiskey. “Oh yeah, this is the good shit.”

“Wasn't there any good whiskey in California?”

“Nope, mostly just cheap beer and the occasional bottle of gin stolen from one of our friends' house.” Billy shrugged and avoided Harrington's eyes by checking the TV to see how much longer the had from 1984. Just fifteen more minutes.

“Do you miss California?” The soft question pulled Billy out of his musings.

“Yeah, man. I miss the ocean and the constant salty taste on my tongue. There were so many things to do, to explore – the freedom of it all, man. That's what I miss the most about California.”

“Are you going to college there?”

“College?” Billy shook his head. “Do I look like fucking college material to you, you preppy?”

“Well, yeah. You are mostly in advanced classes at school and you're pretty good at basketball. You'd be able to get a scholarship and-”

“I'm not planning on going to college, Harrington,” he interrupted harshly, making the other boy wince. “I'm not going to pay thousands to an institution that isn't going to do much for me in the long run. Just so they could flunk me when I won't fit in their fucking mould, or when I'll speak my mind. Fuck that bullshit! I thought the point of the high school graduation was so that no one orders me around anymore. I'm not like you, following into daddy's steps, inheriting a business, a house with a white picket fence, and having a wife and two point five kids.”

“Well, not all of us know ourselves so fucking well, Hargrove. Some of us had a plan and it blew in our fucking faces,” Steve sneered back and God, it fucking turned Billy on to see that familiar fire in Harrington's eyes. The one that had burned into his eyes right before he tried to kick Billy's ass at the Byers place.

Billy grinned sharply. He stood up and pointed his glass at the other boy, “Then figure your shit out, man. Between the two of us, you're the more adjusted one. Just fucking think about what you want to do

and start with that. Forget that fucking bitch!” He waved Harrington away when he opened his mouth to probably say something in her defense, “Yeah, yeah, don't call her bitch, what-the-fuck-ever.”

“I don't know what I want to do, man,” Harrington grouched as he drank his last drop of whiskey.

“Then start with what you don't want to do.”

“I don't want to stay in Hawkins after graduation,” Steve rushed on and stunned both of them into silence, Billy because he hadn't expected such level of honesty and Steve because he hadn't expected to confess his worst thought to the one guy that had been his enemy up to not long ago.

“Then don't stay.”

“It's not that simple.”

“Yes, it is, Harrington. Don't stay! Just go to college in another state, or take a sabbatical, or join Peace Corps, or do whatever the fuck you want to do to figure out what you want to do.” Billy put the glass on the table and turned his whole body towards Harrington, who had stood up as well. At this point, their knees were slightly touching but Billy didn't care. “Explore the world! Your parents seem like they love you, unlike others. They might not agree with your decision, but I think they'd end up supporting you.”

“I want to go to college. Maybe Chicago or Seattle,” Harrington confessed in a small voice like Billy was going to shoot him down. Billy frowned deeper. Someone must have told Harrington at some point that he was stupid, that he didn't have any chances to attend college. Fucking hell, this world was a piece of shit.

Impulsively, he grabbed Harrington by the back of the neck, his move more grounding than threatening, although the lovely brown eyes widened in surprise and maybe a bit of fear. Billy allowed himself a small gesture of compassion and pressed his thumb just behind Steve's ear. The boy half-closed his eyes, each puff of air caressing Billy's cheeks, they were that close.

"Listen to me, Harrington, you can do that. You can attend college," he clarified, making sure that he stared back into the other boy's eyes so that he wouldn't understand that he wasn't lying to him. "Think about what you want, try new things. Who knows? You might fucking surprise yourself."

Ten, nine, eight.....

"Thanks, Billy," Harrington muttered softly. "Who knew you'd be such a good cheerleader?"

Seven, six, five.....

"I'd look awesome in their outfit, and you know it." Billy winked, making Steve blush prettily. Still, none of them pulled away. Harrington pressed a little further into the touch and grabbed a fistful of Billy's shirt. "But seriously, tell anyone about this, Harrington, and you're dead."

Four, three, two....

"Tell them Billy Hargrove has a heart, after all?" Steve leaned further into Billy's space. "No one would believe me."

One....

In the first few seconds of the new year, Billy Hargrove found himself hugged the hell out of him by Steve Harrington, former King of Hawkins High and an all around good guy. Billy stood ramrod still in the confines of Harrington's arms, shaky breath and his hand still wrapped around Harrington's nape. But when Harrington made an attempt to pull away, Billy brought his other hand around Steve's waist and pulled him hard against his chest, their knees knocking painful against each other.

"Happy New Year," Harrington mumbled into Billy's ear and the small puff of air almost made him shudder in pleasure.

"Happy New Year, princess."

They smiled at each other awkwardly when they pulled away and Billy picked up the champagne bottle to open it and maybe drown

away the sudden desire to kiss the hell out of Harrington. They spent the rest of the night drinking and talking about music and movies. It was so fucking easy to talk to Steve and it looked like the other boy enjoyed it just as much, if not even more. At times he got this surprised look on his face as if he was always surprised when Billy listened to or agreed with him.

The champagne brought slurred words and loose limbs. Billy had never had a place where he'd like to stay in forever, but in that particular moment, he wished he'd never have to go away again so he could stay next to Harrington forever. His head was swimming and his tongue felt heavy in his mouth and he closed his eyes for just one moment to rest.

When he opened them some inconsequential time later, he was spread on one of the couches with Harrington loose-limbed and draped all over him. He was fucking snoring in his ear, mouth slightly open, one leg over Billy like a drunk octopus. He was fucking adorable and Billy nuzzled his cheek slightly, a feather touch in the middle of a typhoon. He pulled Steve closer to him and sighed into his hair. He was pressed against the back of the couch, his left arm was numb and he was really hot. But his left hand was splayed on Steve's back, while the right one was resting on Steve's waist. And the guy had a fistful of Billy's shirt, holding on to him for his dear life.

Billy didn't let himself think of the awkwardness of sleeping like that, he didn't let himself think that tomorrow or better said, later that day, Harrington might punch him (rightly so) and even call him *fag* (even more rightly so). He could have this. Just for a few hours, Billy Hargrove could forget about his life and for once have what he wanted.

So he closed his eyes again, took a deep breath, taking in Steve's cologne and his subtle scent of sweat, and fell right back asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you [lambchop33](#) for the beta. :) The remaining mistakes are mine and mine alone.

Trivia time:

In 1984 Christmas Eve fell on a Monday. Subsequently, Christmas Day was on a Tuesday, while New Year's Eve was on a Monday again (yes, I actually researched that, don't ask me why).

I think music plays a key role in Billy's life and that's why it shows up heavily in this chapter. I also have the feeling that he would be the kind of person who'd listen from heavy and trash metal to folk and blues rock. However, I suspect that he would very much incline towards bands like Metallica, Iron Maiden, Anthrax and later on, Megadeth. For some reason though (maybe because I am a fan as well), I wanted him to be a fan of Led Zeppelin, who at the time was considered one of the best rock bands in the world. So here's a timeline, for those who are interested enough:

Metallica *Ride the Lightning* (1984)

Led Zeppelin *House of the Holy* (1973)

Bruce Springsteen *Born in the USA* (1984)

Joy Division singles *Atmosphere* and *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (1980)

AC/DC *Highway to Hell* (1979)

I'd like to thank Wikipedia and my dad for the information above - my dad is a fan of most of the aforementioned bands.

Also, the book that Benny is currently reading (the present from Billy) is *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. An inquiry into Values* by Robert M. Pirsig, which was published in 1974. Because Billy is a little shit like that.

And as always, if you've made it this far, thank you for reading. :)

3. Saint Mungo

Summary for the Chapter:

It's like before it's gonna storm, you know? You can't see it but you can feel it. Like this ugh, electricity. [...] Like a sexual electricity. You feel that and then you make your move.

Notes for the Chapter:

Saint Mungo is a patron saint offering protection against bullies and verbal abuse.

To his disappointment, Billy was spared the awkwardness of the following morning.

He opened his eyes hesitantly, only to realize that he was alone. Although the warm comforter had been thrown over him at some point, a cold shiver still ran down his spine. He blinked a few times, an overwhelming need to cuddle under the blanket washing over him. However, there was soft music coming from the kitchen and he could hear Harrington puttering around.

He stretched and scratched his stomach with the lassitude of a man who knew he was dying but still wanted to take one last bite of the rotten apple of life. He glanced at the watch. Almost nine o'clock. His dad was going to kill him slowly and painfully, but Billy wouldn't have given a fuck about it anyway. He could still remember Steve's slack face, his annoying little snores and the way he had been draped all over Billy like a drunk octopus. He remembered the way he hugged him, the way they talked and if it hadn't been for the small spot of drool on his shirt, everything would have seemed just wishful thinking from his part.

He stood up and stretched again, trying to tame his hair as much as he could, before he dared to go and follow the soft clink of plates.

In spite of being almost nine o'clock in the morning, the light had a faint quality to it. Steve had switched on the light in the kitchen,

however, it was soft around the edges, painting everything into a soft hue of orange and for fuck's sake, Steve Harrington was a fucking vision in that goddamn kitchen. The radio was playing in the background and a guy was singing quite energetically *I'll cross that bridge when I find it, / Another day to make my stand*. That was about all Billy could decipher because Steve was still a fucking vision. And it was too fucking early in the year, not to mention in the morning, to be thinking how hot the boy looked in grey sweats and a fucking blue t-shirt. Seriously, who the fuck looked so well put together first thing in the morning?

Also, fucking Harrington had prepared breakfast if the two plates with scrambled eggs and sizzling bacon were anything to go by.

"Well, well, well, isn't that Steve Harrington just dreamy?" He drawled and sure enough, Harrington jumped almost dropping on the floor the last piece of bacon.

"Fucking hell, Hargrove, wear a goddamn bell next time!" Steve snapped and dropped the pan in the sink, before he grabbed the counter with one hand while the other pressed tightly against his heart. "Ten years of my life just disappeared in a flash."

"Someone has to keep you on your toes." Billy took a few steps into the kitchen. "Anyway, pretty and able to cook breakfast? Harrington, you'll make a good housewife someday." He pretended to wipe away a tear but sat down at the table and snatched his cup of coffee.

"It should be house-husband, dipshit." Harrington slapped him over his hand. "And go wash your face, dickhead, and brush your teeth first."

"How progressive of you!" Billy stood up with a sigh. "What? Are you planning on kissing me good morning, too?"

"I'd rather not throw up so early in the morning, thank you very much." Harrington rolled his eyes at him. "Just go. The bathroom is second door on the right. There's a spare toothbrush in the cupboard under the sink. Also, button up your goddamn shirt. This is not California, surfer boy."

“Be careful, Harrington, you already sound like a weary house-husband.”

“It's because I'm not appreciated in this house. Now go!”

Billy chuckled as he made his way towards the bathroom. Once inside, he took a piss and washed his hands before looking for that spare toothbrush. He loved it when Harrington was a little shit and didn't bother with hiding his snark. Billy had always enjoyed being given a challenge. He grinned in the mirror with his teeth full of toothpaste looking like a fucking maniac. Who could have guessed last night that he was going to have such an amazing first day of the year? He spat and washed his face. He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to fluff it up a little, to no avail.

When he returned in the kitchen, the radio was playing softly in the background, Billy barely able to hear the song as Harrington sat at the table, drinking his coffee and waiting patiently for him so they can have breakfast together. With the amount of whiskey that they had last night, King Steve appeared not to be affected too much by the hangover, a clear sign that he was an experienced drinker.

“Oh, are you waiting for me, Harrington? I'm touched.” He dropped into his seat and dug in.

“It's called having manners, Hargrove, something that you might need to learn about.” Steve watched him clearly amused before he dug into his breakfast as well.

“Fuck me, princess, but this is delicious! You're really good at taking care of people. You'll make an awesome house-husband someday.”

“That's great. It has always been my dream and now that I've got your blessing, I can go and marry someone and have their kids and take care of the house.”

“Well, technically you already have kids,” Billy grumbled with his mouth full.

“Don't do that!” Steve flinched. “That's actually disgusting. Also, what the hell are you talking about?”

"I'm talking about my sister and her pack of nerdy brats, who follow you around like ducklings." Billy finished chewing before adding, "Tell me, pretty boy, are you playing Dungeons and Dragons with them? Is your character sheet like three pages long?" Harrington actually flushed making Billy grin wide and bright. "Fucking hell, you do! You do play Dungeons and Dragons!"

"Tell anyone, Hargrove, and your ass is grass." Harrington scowled at him, still slightly flushed in embarrassment. Billy laughed again and took a sip of coffee. "Tell anyone about this at school and I'll tell them you like a chick band."

"Hey, Heart is fucking cool, princess." Billy finished his coffee and leaned back. "Besides, who the fuck is going to believe you?"

"I'll play *Barracuda*, dipshit, through the speakers if I have to, and when you start singing the chorus, everybody's going to know."

"You wouldn't be able to pull it off."

"You forget I'm friends with nerds now, Hargrove. Watch and learn, surfer boy!"

"I've never surfed in my life, pretty boy."

"Well, I'm not pretty, but you're still calling me a pretty boy."

"What? It's no one's fault you're pretty, Harrington." Billy leaned forward and rested his chin on his hands, blinking exaggeratedly. "You're so pretty that every girl in this shithole of a town swoons at your sight. In fact, this is the first thing I heard about you when I came first in Hawkins: *King Steve is so pretty and dreamy*. And I kid you not, there was an actual sigh at the end of that sentence. Or maybe that was just Tommy because that boy sure as hell has a hard-on for you."

"God, you're such an asshole!" Steve pushed at his face jokingly, a lot more mortified this time. Billy leaned back again and smiled softly at him. The change in mood took them swiftly by surprise.

"I might have to tell them you kind of live up to the hype, Harrington," he said softly. The truth of the words wrapped around

them like a warm shelter in the middle of a storm, and Steve had to smile back, something searing in his eyes.

“Don't give me this bullshit,” he mumbled shyly.

“It's not bullshit what they say about you. You're not bullshit, Harrington.” The words reverberated around the other boy because suddenly his eyes widened briefly as if shocked by the truth in Billy's words. The entire moment caught Billy on the wrong foot as if he gave away a much larger truth than he had intended in the first place.

The times before coming to this place were an enigma for Billy. He had been asking questions about the alleged King Steve before meeting him, that was true, but people couldn't mention much without gushing a little about the guy. Billy hadn't been lying about that. Even fucking Tommy had praised the guy in his own shallow way. How he had hated Harrington back then! How he had wanted that throne and that crown and how much he hated them now and wanted to give them back. Because he sure as hell wasn't worthy of them, but the guy in front of him sure was.

“Thank you, Billy.” That whispered answer made Billy's genuine smile crank up a notch, but he refused to go all girly on Harrington's ass. He had been enough as it was.

“De nada, amigo.” He winked and then sighed as he looked at the clock. Almost ten now. Time to face the music. Not even the painful jolt of what he would expect at home could make him regret this. “Now, if you'll excuse me, princess, I need to return to my humble abode. It's been fun. The whiskey was good, the company even better, but the champagne was the best.” Harrington laughed at that and followed Billy in the living-room, where he collected his coat.

“Thanks for everything, man,” Steve said as they made their way to the entrance. “Glad to have some company my own age for once.”

“Fucking hell, Harrington, make me another breakfast like this, or any meal for that matter, and you can have my company any time you want.”

Steve's eyes burned suddenly, aflame and piercing, and Billy couldn't breathe. Harrington's full lips twitched softly and when he spoke, at last, Billy was sure that it wasn't what he had meant to say initially, "Good to know your stomach rules your social life, Hargrove."

"A man's got to eat," he mumbled, somehow on the wrong foot, like something had only been dodged at the last moment. "And besides, you still need training for your life as a house-husband."

"So you're actually doing me a favor?" The question was meant as a joke, but Billy couldn't take the answer lightly. Not with Steve fucking Harrington.

"You're the one doing me a favor here, pretty boy," he said gravely, surprising Harrington. Billy wanted to add more, to explain why he thought that but he couldn't unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth, which was suddenly dry. And if he were to judge by the way Harrington's eyes went soft and warm, Billy didn't have to. "Thanks for the party and breakfast, Harrington. See you around."

"See you, Hargrove. And button up your shirt, for fuck's sake. It's winter."

"Yes, dear."

Billy got into his car and looked at Harrington, who was still in the doorway. He smiled and waved before the other boy answered back and finally entered the house.

Fuck! This year was going to be a hell of a ride.

~O~

School started with bruises still healing on his ribs and back, courtesy of his father after spending the New Year's night at Harrington's place. However, Billy didn't say anything to anyone – along the years, he'd displayed some mad skills at hiding his bruises and his aches. The fact that, at times, he could hide in plain sight, just proved to Billy that a lot of times people saw only what they wanted to see and they could easily turn their heads away if they'd try to avoid anything else. He just ensured that they were covered and that even at home,

Max wouldn't get an opportunity of spotting them. That girl was worse than a dog with a bone when it came to the way Neil treated Billy. It was nice and fucking annoying at the same time.

Nevertheless, Billy was glad to be back at school; he had a good excuse to keep away from his father as much as possible. He enjoyed school when the teachers were bothered to actually teach them something, he was able to see Harrington more often than he had during the holiday, but mostly, he just enjoyed the way that Wheeler bitch would scowl at him from a distance each time Harrington would laugh at something he said or whenever they greeted each other friendlier than it was technically allowed to two former enemies.

Billy reveled in Wheeler's anger and Byers' puzzled looks. And he loved, even more, the fact that Harrington didn't pretend they hadn't seen each other throughout the holiday. After the New Year, Harrington had actually dropped once or twice at the garage and they'd smoked together behind the garage. And one memorable evening, they had even met at the quarry, listening to the Led Zeppelin albums that Harrington had bought. Therefore, when the school had started again, it had been difficult to pretend that they didn't give a fuck about each other anymore and so they had started to greet each other and talked during breaks. It puzzled the masses, it puzzled Tommy and the gang, and it sure as hell puzzled and annoyed Wheeler and Byers. But mostly Wheeler. And that was more satisfying for Billy than one should normally admit.

One gloomy Tuesday, towards the end of January, during lunch, Harrington dropped to his table. Billy had been eating alone for the past few days, Tommy not happy with Billy's disappearing act from the party and his sudden allegiance to the former king. Billy couldn't care less about what Tommy liked or didn't like. In spite of his big talk, at the end of the day, Tommy was just spewing a lot of shit but did absolutely nothing. Empty words coming from a blank space.

He'd usually go out for lunch and smoke behind the bleachers. Or he'd go the library and have a book about mechanics to read. But that day, he'd decided he'd brave the lunch crowd to eat a sandwich and stay in the cafeteria, where it was warm. He was studying a magazine about fucking Choppers, which Benny had given him (sooner or later,

he might have to punch someone for calling him a nerd if he continued like this) – also fuck Benny and his fucking Choppers, he must have been in a bike gang at some point – and he was munching on a fucking apple of all things when Harrington dropped in the opposite seat.

"Are you lost, princess?" Billy asked nonchalantly, keeping his cool as he raised his eyes and checked out Harrington. He could feel the way everyone in the goddamn cafeteria was side-glancing them, wondering what must have happened during the winter holiday to make these two guys talking and even taking lunch together. But it was especially satisfying to see that Wheeler was absolutely pissed. Wow, this was going to be good!

"No, but I need your help, my liege," Harrington replied obnoxiously. He was dressed in a multi-colored polo that did nothing to hide the waist to shoulders ratio.

"Fuck off!" Billy tried hard to hide the fucking grin but it was so easy to smile around Harrington.

"I wish, your highness," and Harrington's eyes crinkled. He enjoyed this too much, the little fucker. "But I need your advanced brain."

"Oh, I'm gonna kill Max!"

"Max didn't say anything, dipshit. We're going to the same freaking high school, remember?" Harrington made a complicated dismissive gesture. "So anyway, I need your help." He pushed a sheet forward slightly wincing. "Can you have a look and tell me what you think?"

"Why don't you ask Wheeler?" He asked defensively but he was already skimming through the essay. Apparently, it was supposed to talk about symbols in *The Scarlet Letter*, but it was so all over the place that after a while, Billy had lost any good idea that might have existed at the beginning of the essay.

"I'm asking you," Harrington mumbled in anticipation. Billy looked up only to see Harrington staring at a loss. "And since when do you eat apples?"

"Fucking Tamara, man!" Billy hissed as he gave up trying to make sense of Harrington's essay. "She gave me a whole lecture about eating healthy and having a daily intake of fruit. She's worse than my mom used to be."

"Who's Tamara?"

"Benny's girlfriend. She's fucking scarier than he is." Billy leaned back and grabbed another bite out of his apple. "Benny thinks he's hot shit, but Tamara has him whipped."

"You too, as I can see."

"Fuck off, Harrington!"

"No, no, this is actually cute." Harrington leaned back as well, a sardonic smile on his full lips. He was enjoying this too much, the fucker. "I mean, you're eating the fruit, although she isn't here to witness it. So technically, you're actually doing what she says."

"Did you just call me *cute*?" Billy's eyes narrowed, actually scowling at Harrington. The masses couldn't hear what the fuck they were telling to each other, but still held their collective breath when they saw Billy's tough look. It was a testament to their new friendship when Harrington actually burst out laughing.

"Well, if the shoe fits," he answered in between hiccups.

"Just for that I should let you deal with your stupid essay on your own," he grumbled and took another bite.

"But you won't, right?" The hopeful look on Harrington's face was a weapon of mass destruction.

"No, of course not." Billy pinched the bridge of his nose. "When do you need to submit it?"

"I think by Friday."

"All right, pretty boy. I'll have a look at it and see what I can come up with."

"It's really shitty, isn't it?" The question rattled Billy more than anything else. It wasn't the question as such, so much as the tone of it. Billy had been made feel bad about himself for so long by his father that he could recognize a fellow sufferer in a second.

"No, it's not really shitty, Harrington, it's just disorganized. You've got the tendency to be all over the place but nothing that can't be fixed. Stop being a princess about it and meet me at the garage. We'll go through it every day, and I promise you that by Friday, you'll have a fucking A essay."

"Couldn't you come to my place after work? My parents are away most of the week and we wouldn't be bothered by anyone."

"Sorry, pretty boy, I can't this week." Billy actually winced as he answered. "My dad wasn't very happy with me spending most of the New Year's Eve out so late. I'm kind of in the hothouse for the foreseeable future. So no extra-curricular activities for one more week at least."

"Got it. Then I'll see you at the garage. What time should I come?"

They spent the rest of the lunch figuring out a time when he could ask Benny for a bit of break to help Harrington with his essay, then talked about Choppers and cars, Harrington surprisingly knowledgeable. However, every time Billy glanced around, he could see Wheeler throwing daggers in his direction as if he didn't deserve to bask in Steve Harrington's presence, not after what he had done. Although it was kind of true, Billy didn't appreciate the sentiment. Wheeler would come after his ass soon enough. He could feel it.

She didn't disappoint when later that afternoon, she waited for him leaning against the Camaro, holding a few books against her chest like a shield. She was so tiny that Billy could probably break her in half but her eyes were blazing. She didn't seem cowered by him, by his reputation, or by what he had done before but that didn't mean that he was pleased about it. Still, perhaps this fearlessness made her not look so mousy. He could almost see whatever the hell made Harrington love her so much. And forgive her too for running away with the creepy Byers kid.

"Are you lost, Wheeler?" He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke in her face just to be obnoxious.

"No, asshole, I came to have a talk with you," she said brazenly in between coughs. "What the hell do you think you're doing with Steve?"

"I don't follow, Wheeler. Try and use your big girl words."

"Fine, dickhead." Her eyes narrowed, almost in hate. "I want you to stay away from Steve. He's a good guy and you beat the shit out of him. You sure as hell don't deserve to be friends with him after what you've done. You don't deserve a good person such as Steve."

"Well, neither do you, so I guess we're even," he sneered, unable to keep the same blasé tone about it.

"How dare you?"

"I'm not the one that dumped him for a creepy guy, after telling him in front of everyone that he's bullshit and everything about your relationship is bullshit." He took a long drag when he saw Wheeler taking a step back as if he had just punched her. She literally turned white. "Yeah, I might have been drunk but I heard that. I think all of Hawkins heard that. You know what? You have some fucking guts telling me that I don't deserve Steve, but you're not better than me. So stop this self-righteous lecture that you've got going on here because it sure as hell isn't going to work with me, princess."

"You're an asshole, you know that?"

"You're not telling me anything new. But at least I don't pretend to be better than others." He took the last drag out of his cigarette, then threw it next to the tire and stubbed it. "He's not a fucking child, Wheeler. He can make his own goddamn decisions. If he's responsible enough to take care of your brother, my sister and their pack of nerds, then he sure as hell can make a decision on his own."

"Maybe you're right, but that doesn't mean I have to like it," she mumbled, a little confused by this unexpected turn of conversation.

"I don't like that he's still friends with you and Byers, though you

both kind of went behind his back, but there's that." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat and looked around the parking lot to ensure that Steve wasn't there yet. The familiar anger that bubbled just under the surface threatened to rear its ugly head, and Billy didn't want to have any issues with Harrington, not now when they were beginning to be friends and hang out. "Can we just agree that both of us don't deserve Steve Harrington and move the fuck on? I need to pick up my sister and I don't want to be late."

"Yes, I guess we can do that." She looked pensively at him for a moment before adding, "Like a non-aggression pact?"

"Yeah, something like that," he agreed and actually smirked at her. "It would be useful to both of us, taking into consideration we share more classes together than with Steve."

"That's true." Her lips twitched and she didn't sound so upset anymore. "Can you-?" She took a deep breath. "Can you just help him with schoolwork sometimes? He doesn't come to me anymore and he needs all the help he can get with his English. Calculus too, I think."

"Yeah, I've read his English essay." Wheeler winced, and Billy seriously considered laughing out loud at the ridiculousness of the situation. "He's all over the place."

"Yeah, he really is."

"Now, is there anything else, Wheeler, or can I go?"

"I guess if you must." Billy grinned widely at her little shit moves. For fuck's sake, he didn't want to become friends with the entire high school; he had enough on his plate as it was. He got into the car and drove away to pick up Max.

All the way there, he held the steering wheel in a white-knuckle grip. Maybe Wheeler had sounded like a bitch, but in a way she was right. He kind of didn't deserve Steve Harrington's friendship. Not after what he did to him.

But he could try, couldn't he? Could he at least pretend he fucking

did deserve it? And who the hell came up with the idea that people deserve other people? Because Billy sure as hell didn't deserve Neil Hargrove in his fucking life. *Nobody* deserved Neil. Such an insufferable stupid fucking idea. Deserving people like they were goddamn prizes.

~O~

Billy took another drag from his cigarette as he watched one of their customers' car disappear into the night. It was just about seven o'clock but it felt much later. It didn't help that the silence around the garage was perturbed only by the noise they were making inside and the slow notes of a song on the radio. He looked around and checked the other buildings, most of them with lights off. There was something creepy about Hawkins at night, Bill couldn't shake the feeling of it even if he had tried. The darkness fell harder here, painting all the buildings in thick shadows that at times seemed to have a life of their own. The barren trees stood like silent sentinels, but no one would be able to tell what they guarded, them or those shadows.

Back in California, the breeze at night felt like a caress and the sky didn't seem like an impenetrable dome, guarding what was inside. The air hadn't been crisp like here, the snow had been non-existent and the sand had stuck to his skin like sugar. But there had been the sense of freedom, the salty scent of ocean promising a sense of freedom that would come eventually. However, when Harrington mentioned Santa Monica and returning there, Billy hadn't been so sure. There were many good memories there, sure – sun-kissed caresses and hot make-out sessions, open up shirts and flip-flops, salty skin and tanned muscles. But there were also bad memories – his mom's grave, the linoleum in kitchen stained with his blood, walls full of his father's shouts. Broken bones and indifference. He wasn't so sure that he'd like to return back there either.

Maybe start over in a new place.

Or maybe just stay in Hawkins.

“You know, technically, you're still on my dime,” Billy flinched when Benny clapped him on the shoulder and the big guy winced. He took

away his hand repentantly and looked around them as well. "What you're thinking of?"

"Nothing important," he mumbled and went to take another drag from his cigarette only to notice that it had died in his hand. "Shit," he mumbled and flicked it away before taking another one out.

"It sure doesn't look like nothing if it makes you this quiet, Hargrove." Benny smiled softly in the darkness as he watched Billy take another drag. "Usually, you'd drive me crazy with your dislike of Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan."

"When you returned from Vietnam, how did you know what you were going to do?" Billy stammered out, pissed off at himself for voicing out his doubts.

"You've got the wrong impression about it," Benny spoke softly for such a huge guy. "I didn't know shit about anything when I came back. For about two years after, I drifted around, drinking my thoughts away and hoping that I might off myself."

"Fuck," Billy crushed the word between his teeth. Because he'd been in such a shitty position for most of his life, sometimes it was difficult to remember that other people had their own shit to deal with. "So what happened that made you return here?"

"My dad died and left me the garage." Benny glanced back at the building. "I was lucky that Lennie wanted to stay because I knew shit all about running a business and not much about cars or what kind of customers I might get. It took a while though to get better. Why do you ask?"

"I'm not sure I should be leaving Hawkins," Billy croaked.

Benny stared startled at him, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Just what I said, Hammond." Billy ran his stained fingers through his hair. "I don't think I'd be able to go back to Santa Monica, I don't have many fond memories there. And if I leave here, if I leave the house, just what's going to happen to Max? I don't see Neil behaving for long." Just the simple thought made him sick to his stomach – it

was far-reaching, but still such a distinct possibility.

“So what you're trying to actually tell me is that you'd rather stay in fucking Hawkins and remain your father's punching bag rather than look for a better future?” Benny sounded pissed, each word sharp and biting. “Is this about what happened over Christmas or the beating that you got after the New Year?”

Billy looked up, stunned as hell. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Really? I'm talking about the cracked lip that you wore like a badge of honor at my Christmas dinner. I'm talking about how you couldn't stay under a car without groaning in pain for at least a week after the New Year.” Benny scratched his beard and moved his weight on the other leg. “Just because I didn't say anything about it, it doesn't mean that I didn't notice. I see you, Hargrove, and don't you fucking forget about it.”

“So what?” Billy pulled away from the wall, keeping his body aggressively forwards, although Benny could fuck him up pretty good. “Do you think you deserve a fucking medal or something? A *Well done to you, Benny, for noticing the poor fuck that's been working in your garage and his fucked up life* commendation?”

“No, what I deserve is not listening to this crap I'm hearing,” Benny replied just as combatively. “We'll think about a solution regarding your sister, but you're not fucking staying at your father's house after you turn eighteen. You're not going to get buried alive in fucking Hawkins. Not on my watch. I'll take you in if I have to, but the fucking asshole is going to kill you sooner or later if you remain in that house.”

All fight left Billy in a heady rush and he bowed his head again, speaking softly into the night, “I just don't know what I should do.”

“I know, and I don't envy you, kid, but we'll figure out.” Benny stubbed the cigarette under his work boot. “You just keep the good fight on. I'll help with the rest.” He ruffled Billy's hair, annoying the shit out of the teen.

"I'm not a fucking dog, Hammond," he sneered as they got back in the garage. The telephone was ringing shrilly, covering Benny's chuckles. "Lennie, can't you answer that?"

"Do I have to do everything around here, boy, while you two chuckleheads keep smoking outside?" Lennie stood up from under the hood. "Go and answer it yourself."

"It seems I have to do everything around here," Billy mumbled under his breath but went and picked up the phone. "Benny's Garage."

"Hey, Billy, it's Max." Billy's blood froze.

"Max? What's going on? Are you in trouble?"

"Nothing serious, but I need your help." She spoke fast as if she didn't want to give him the chance to refuse her. "We were at the arcade and me and Lucas stayed behind. Lucas' dad was supposed to pick us up, but his car broke down and there's no one to drop us home."

"What about Harrington?" He asked as a cold shiver ran down his spine. Neil would have hated to see Mr. Sinclair dropping off his daughter anyway.

"He already took off with Mike, Dustin, and Will. By the time he'd get back here, I'd be really late home."

She didn't need to add anything else. Neil Hargrove didn't like Max to be late any more than he liked it in Billy, but at least he hadn't touched her. However, that didn't mean that he wasn't going to punish her.

"Okay, I'll speak with Benny," he heard himself saying. "I'll be there in twenty. You and Lucas stay put."

"Okay. Thanks, Billy."

They hang up probably at the same time and Benny waved him away as soon as he mentioned what happened to Max. He just washed his hands quickly, his fingers still dirty under the nails, but didn't change his uniform and left for the arcade. The thought of seeing Sinclair after what had happened at Byers' place didn't sit well with Billy,

especially because while he had seen the little guy around, he hadn't been speaking with him, Max being really good at playing interference between them.

Did Mr. Sinclair break down or was this just Max finally forcing some interaction between her boyfriend and her brother? Something ugly uncoiled inside of him. Billy didn't like to be put against the wall, and if she really wanted to force them to interact, she'd be in for a big surprise.

Joy Division's *Atmosphere* was blaring from his speakers when he arrived at the arcade, only to see Max and Lucas already waiting for him outside. Without a word, Lucas got in the back of the car followed by Max in the passenger's seat next to him, lips pulled tight around the corners.

"Thanks, Billy, I really appreciate it," she quipped as soon as she pulled her seatbelt on. He changed the music to the radio so that he didn't offend their delicate sensibilities. Lucas Sinclair was sitting in the back seat as if expecting to be attacked any minute. Billy spared him a glance in the rearview mirror before he revved the engine of the car and pulled back into the traffic.

"You'll need to tell me where you live, Sinclair," he said, at last, keeping his voice level and not threatening in any way. "I don't know Hawkins that well yet."

"Third street right, then second left and drive straight for a while," Sinclair replied quietly, and Billy simply nodded in response, following his instructions. Max watched both of them with her arms crossed but didn't say anything, so they let the music fill in the silence of the car, the quietness unbearable at times.

"Relax, Max," Billy spoke suddenly after a while. He craved a cigarette but didn't want to open the window and hear goddamn complaints or worse, being told that he'd done it on purpose to irk Sinclair. "Neil is going to understand. The fact that you called me to pick you up is definitely a plus in his notebook. Don't worry about it, he's not going to be an asshole to you."

"But he might be to you," she murmured and she avoided his sharp

gaze when he briefly glanced at her. “He might say that you should be around more often, maybe stop going to work.”

“He won't say that.” His fingers twitched on the steering wheel. Fuck, he really needed a cigarette. “Sheriff Hopper might have something to add to that and Neil wants to keep a low profile here.”

“If you're sure.”

“Yes, I am.”

They turned on Sinclair's street much faster than he had expected and Billy still didn't know what he was supposed to do, whether he should keep his mouth shut or actually talk to the kid. The night at Byers' place seemed permanently embedded in his memory just like some of the more difficult moments with his father. But that night had been a make of his own and he couldn't find it in him to forgive anything about it. The anger had been building up and building up like shaky tower blocks about to collapse and Harrington and Sinclair had been in the way of his anger. This fury had crashed over everything and everyone like a steamroller.

He could feel it now again, pulsating through his veins, igniting the old resentment, the old childish whining – what did he have to do this? Why did no one apologize to him when they let shit carry on for so long? Those cops at the local police station knew what his father had been doing to him and yet they didn't act. They didn't do anything. What did he have to make amends to Sinclair? Who was going to make amends for him?

Because you fucking know better, a voice inside of him whispered, suspiciously sounding like Benny. He stopped the car suddenly, just a few houses away from Sinclair's. He could see Mr. Sinclair outside, by his car, hood pulled up, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with his car, using a flashlight and not much else.

“Billy?” Max asked wearily, and Bill hated so fucking much that tone of voice. He hated so fucking much that weariness that never seemed to go away when people talked to him. He ran his fingers through his hair and, taking a deep breath, he turned in his seat and stared at Sinclair. The kid had definitely balls because he stood straighter and

looked slightly weary, but nothing more.

"I wanted to apologize, Sinclair, for the way I jumped on you that night," he gritted through his clenched teeth as if this conversation wasn't such a good idea. When he heard Max's startled gasp, he felt spurred on, "It was wrong from my part and I shouldn't have done that."

"You told me to keep away from Max," the kid retorted and crossed his arms in front of him. "You still want me to stay away from her."

"Yes," he admitted.

"Because I'm black," Lucas concluded, and Billy burst into a biting and ravaged laughter.

"Billy, knock it off," Max said and scowled at him.

"That wouldn't matter to me much, kid," he went quickly to answer. "It wouldn't matter whether you'd be black, blue or yellow. But it matters to Neil, it matters to my father, and he doesn't like when things don't go his way. Sooner or later, he will find out that you and Max hang out together and it won't matter that you have three other little nerds around you. He'll only care about you, and you won't be the one to pay the price." He pointed at Max with his thumb. "*She will*. That's the reason I wanted to keep you away from her."

"And that makes it alright?" The question jarred his already fraying patience.

"No, it doesn't make it alright, that's why I'm apologizing."

"You can't apologize for something you're not actually regretting."

"Fucking hell, what the hell do you want, Sinclair? A fucking written apology?" Billy ran his fingers through his hair again and grabbed tightly the seat. "I'm sorry for the way I jumped you and the way I behaved with you. It wasn't fucking right, I can see that. I was seeing it back then too, but it was easier to pretend that that protecting Max was the right thing to do."

"You weren't protecting Max, you were just protecting yourself,"

Lucas forced out, and it made Billy swallow back the bile that suddenly flooded his throat. Fucking hell, apologizing to this guy was like being put through the fucking shredder. And facing the truth about that night over and over again? About himself? It left a rancid taste in his mouth.

"Maybe," he mumbled defeated. "Yeah, you're probably right." Not probably. In reality, it was true, at least back then. Because if something happened to Max or if something pissed off Neil, Billy paid for it. Billy had been paying for a lot of things along his life. However, the admission seemed to soften Sinclair as he uncrossed his arms and rested his hands on his knobbly knees.

"So basically what you are saying is that you apologize for your behavior but not for warning me off," Sinclair concluded and, seriously, kids these days were way too smart for their own good.

"Yes, kind of."

"You still want me to stay away from your sister?"

"Kind of."

"But you won't interfere and you won't act like a jerk anymore, right?"

"Yes."

"All right, then. I appreciate you apologizing to me. Thank you, I guess." Sinclair glanced at Max briefly before he stared back at Billy. "But it doesn't make it right. And if I hear you're back to your old ways, I promise you I'll help Max testing that bat on you."

"I guess that's only fair." Billy turned his body back to the steering wheel and gripped it tight. The weight that he had kept around since that night hadn't disappeared like he might have expected. He started the engine and drove to the front alley of the house. Max silently got off the car to make room for Lucas to get out of it. The teen was with one foot out when he turned to Billy, something harsh in the way he stared him down.

"Maybe you wanted to protect Max and maybe you wanted me to

stay away from her because of that, but don't tell me that being black had nothing to do with it. We both know the truth here.”

He got off the car, leaving Billy gutted, gripping tightly the steering wheel. He could hear Max and Lucas talking to Mr. Sinclair, but couldn't make what they were saying. It hit him then like a ton of bricks that addressing the issues that he had might take years, decades even. What hurt the worst was the fact that he couldn't blame his father for everything. He couldn't keep constantly blaming others, blaming his friends back in Santa Monica and he could blame his father only so far for his opinions. In truth, he couldn't blame anyone really but himself.

Billy glanced at Mr. Sinclair, at the way he smiled at his son, at the gentle way in which he explained that he had no damn clue what he was looking for. Mr. Sinclair was a better father than Neil Hargrove could ever dream to be. And Billy could make the first step in the right direction.

He didn't have an excuse anymore.

He had to act.

He got out of the car and coming around it, he said, “Good evening, Mr. Sinclair. I am Billy, I'm Max's brother.”

“Hello,” Mr. Sinclair reached for his hand and shook it. “Nice to meet you. Sorry for the mix-up, but I just couldn't get this old thing started.”

“Maybe it's time to try and look for a new car, dad,” Lucas said, watching Billy wearily the whole time, as if afraid that what he had said before stepping out of the car would come bite him in the ass.

“Could I have a look?” Billy asked softly. “I work for Benny's Garage and I might be able to see what's wrong with it. If you hold the flashlight.”

“Son, I'll do whatever you need me to do.”

Being on the familiar ground felt good. Billy leaned forward and looked inside the car, testing different components.

"Mr. Sinclair, can you please try and start the engine? See what happens?"

"Sure. Lucas, hold the flashlight for Billy."

"Okay, and now." Mr. Sinclair tried to start the engine. Bill frowned when nothing happened. He touched inside, looking for something. "Okay, try again." Mr. Sinclair did as instructed. Again nothing happened. Billy made a face.

"Is that bad?" Lucas asked curiously when he saw his expression. Billy nodded.

"I think you have a clogged fuel filter, Mr. Sinclair," he said to the man as he got off the car. "It might start tomorrow morning but it won't take you too far and then it might damage the fuel pump as well. My best advice is to tow it down tomorrow morning to a garage and have it fixed."

"Damn, I was afraid that you were going to say that," Mr. Sinclair said as he pulled the hood down and took the flashlight from Lucas. "Are you working tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir, but only in the afternoon. However, Benny is there, usually first thing in the morning, so he can have a look at it if you'd like."

"Okay, I'll do that then. Thank you very much for your help," Mr. Sinclair said kindly again and shook his hand, and Billy watched with envy the casual way in which he had his other arm wrapped around the bony shoulders of his son. Casual, protective, caring.

"You have nothing to thank me for, sir. I didn't do much."

"Well, you still tried, which always counts in my books," Mr. Sinclair replied, and a cold sweat broke on Billy's skin. He knew. Mr. Sinclair knew what he had done to his son and he still had talked politely to him. The shame of it all rushed through him, making him blush slightly.

"Have a good night, sir." He nodded softly. "Come on, Max, let's go home."

They both got in the car. Max waved at Lucas one more time, but Billy just looked straight ahead as he started the engine and drove off. They didn't speak at all during the ride, for once Max knowing when to keep her mouth shut. Billy didn't need a pat on the back at the moment, telling him how well he did by asking forgiveness. Fuck, he really felt weird about it. Like he apologized but hadn't in a way.

He parked the car next to Neil's pick up and took a deep breath as he leaned over the steering wheel.

"Just let me do the talking, all right?" He mumbled and rubbed his forehead.

"Yeah, okay." Max looked cowed for once. Maybe it wasn't that bad that she was aware how Neil was in reality. Maybe that would help her pay extra attention to the way she behaved around him and what she'd say.

"We're home," Billy said loudly as they entered the house.

"Billy?" He heard Susan's voice from the kitchen. She was wiping her hands with a kitchen towel when he and Max came into the kitchen. "Oh, Max, you too? Why are you so late?"

"Nancy, the girl that was supposed to drop her off, had problems with her car," Billy said. He went to the fridge and grabbed a can of soda. "She called me at the garage to come and pick her up but it took a while." He opened the can and turned back to Susan, who smiled hesitantly at him.

"Thank you, Billy, that was kind of you."

"This wouldn't have happened if she had paid more attention to the time." Neil came in the kitchen and the hair at the back of Billy's head stood up. Max had the decency to keep her mouth shut, for once looking like she regretted being late. She slowly bowed her head as if in sorry.

"Yes, sir," she mumbled into her chest, and Neil seemed satisfied with her answer. *How fucking easy for her*, the ugly part of Billy thought. All she needed to do was saying those words and Neil would back off.

On the other hand, no matter how many times Billy repeated them, how many times he spewed them to his father, Neil Hargrove would never be satisfied with them. Neil turned his attention to him, his stare assessing, as usual, taking in Billy's dirty uniform and his stained hands.

"For once, Billy was capable to uphold his responsibilities to this family," Neil said coldly. "Color me surprised. Now go and wash up. Dinner will be ready in ten."

"Yes, sir," Billy muttered and put the can on the counter. He was just passing by Neil when his father grabbed him tightly by the mullet and pulled hard. To the outside world, it would have seemed playful, just a father roughing up his son a little, but Billy burnt with fear and shame. "And do something about your hair soon," his father hissed, "or I might take the matter into my own hands."

"Yes, sir." Neil pulled him hard one more time before he let Billy go and the young man scuttled quickly into his room, harsh breaths sliding across the walls. He pulled out a t-shirt and some sweats and hurried to the bathroom.

Neil Hargrove was in a mood, and Billy wasn't going to test the fucking limits that evening. As he stepped into the shower, he thought briefly how much he wanted to have stayed at the shop and have a talk with Benny, smoke a cigarette or share some food. How come a stranger wanted better things for him while his father hated him so much? It was going to remain forever a question without an answer.

~O~

Billy opened his eyes suddenly, a cold sweat breaking on his skin, heart hammering in his chest as if it'd like nothing more than breaking his ribs and getting out of there. As if Billy was a frightening place to be.

Like a cornered animal, he listened to the silence of the house, not daring to breathe. The quietness of the house was like a shroud wrapped around his already dead body as if his brain had escaped the terrible murder but his heart had not. He could still hear the

humming of the fridge, far away, like an airplane that could have taken Billy away from his home a long time ago.

Try and run away, boy, and I promise you, I'll get you in your sleep.

Oh yeah. The nightmare.

He shuddered and turned on his side. Just two in the morning. The dark was pounding around him, each breath so loud that Billy wanted to stop completely. What if his father heard him? What if his father would carry out his threat? Those words had kept him awake on so many nights that at that point Billy was perfectly capable of waking suddenly and wide awake at any time during the night.

It wasn't like Neil Hargrove would give a shit about his son. *You try and run away, boy...* It would have been all about his reputation. Billy wiped his clammy hands on the sheet and turned on his back again, staring at the ceiling. He could still remember that night. He was twelve and he was planning to get out of his house and never come back. He didn't care what would happen to him. He didn't care that kids like him were chewed by society's rotten teeth and spit out unrecognizable. All he cared was getting away from his dad, and Frankie, with his *you're going to die, dude*, could fuck off.

Frankie didn't live with his dad. Frankie didn't have to be extra careful all the time, he didn't have to make sure that he'd wash dishes, that he'd cook or he'd not get anything to eat, that he'd have to be extra careful at school – get good grades, be the best on the basketball court and outside of it, get in trouble by pummelling other kids if they'd disrespect you but not that serious trouble. Frankie didn't live with constantly redefining shades of grey because his dad never made a clear distinction between black or white, anything could set him off and anything could be used against Billy. Frankie could go fuck himself to his five brothers that constantly teased him but who'd do anything for him.

Billy was ready to leave. He'd mowed lawns that summer and his nape was scorched by the too merciless caress of the sun. Billy had been used to too hard caresses and besides, the sun had nothing on Neil Hargrove. His sandy blonde hair had turned softer, a shade lighter and his hands and arms had turned brown. He had all his

money saved in a sock under the floorboard together with a backpack full of snacks and three changes plus underwear. He'd get a ticket to Colorado where his grandma on his mom's side lived and he'd try to convince her to take him in. Worst come to worst, he'd hitchhike.

He'd been extremely quiet in those days and his father had smelled the danger immediately. That had been his first mistake. How could he have known that his father could read him so well? The second mistake had been that he had collected all the snacks from the household instead of putting some money aside and buying them himself.

The dinner had been quiet and for once his father had kept his mouth shut. He'd watched the small TV in the kitchen corner, chewing tactfully each piece of macaroni and cheese. Billy had been way too nervous to eat anything so he'd simply played with the food.

Then suddenly, his father turned to Billy and stared at him coldly and assessing. Billy froze, an ice statue in the middle of the house, prayed upon by the hollowing winds.

"Don't think I don't know what you're planning," his voice lacked any emotion. His father had always been at his worst when he was this blank mask that Billy could barely call human. "Try and run away, boy, and I promise you I'll get you in your sleep." Then he had turned his attention back to the TV while Billy had been choking on air and the ruins of his fantasy. It hadn't been a mild threat – it had been an unequivocal truth under which spell Billy had lived ever since.

He had eaten the snacks with stupid fucking Frankie then beat the shit out of him. If Frankie had kept his mouth shut, if he hadn't jinxed it, maybe Billy could have made it to his grandmother. He'd been suspended three days and his father made him scrub the fucking bathroom with a toothbrush after he made sure that his back had been whipped with the belt. Then, when he had returned to school, he'd taken another beating from Frankie's brothers. He hadn't cared by that point.

Something wild was born inside of him, feeding on the fear and weariness of others. He'd never again be weak and let others know the truth. Frankie had never spoken to him ever since. He'd become

the last person to ever know the truth about Billy's bruises.

Billy sighed and listened to the silence around him one more time. No one had stirred and he was safe another night. But not even the soothing silence and the image of Harrington in his arms could pull him out of his misery.

It took him a while to calm down.

It took him much longer to fall asleep.

~O~

The following morning, Harrington was waiting for him in front of his locker, his back pressed tight against it, dark bags under his eyes, a deep frown between his eyebrows. The black jumper only highlighted all the more the paleness of his skin and the sagging shoulders. He peered at Billy through long eyelashes.

"Harrington!" Billy clapped him twice on the shoulder and was satisfied to see a tiny bit of tension sliding away from the other boy as he leaned forward into his hand. He squeezed him tighter. "Missed me so goddamn much that you had to wait for me at the locker?"

"There's no one else with an ugly mug such as yours, Hargrove! I needed to see it. It wakes me up better and faster than any coffee in the world."

"You wound me," Billy mockingly put his hand on his heart. "But as one king to another, I'll let this slide. What can I do for you, pretty boy?"

"You're planning on going to the quarry tonight?"

The question surprised the hell out of Billy. There it was that familiar nervous energy, crackling just under Steve's skin. It was contagious. Suddenly, the wild wolf pressed against Billy's walls again, craving to see that energy cracking and pulling out. Harrington was fucking addictive at times. And no, Billy hadn't planned to go to the quarry because in between school, work out sessions with Hopper, work with Benny, and trying to fucking dodge his father, it made him exhausted. But there was something wasting away in Harrington,

sipping through his skin and poisoning everything around it.

"No, I wasn't," he answered, the truth sounding a little harshly around the edges, mostly just to test Harrington and the guy didn't disappoint. His shoulders slumped a little further, the frown deepened and his fingers twitched as if he was looking for something, a cigarette or his bat. "Want to meet there?" The question flew out of his mouth before he even thought of it. Fuck!

Harrington watched him with his big brown eyes and fucking Christ, how was anyone capable of refusing anything to that guy?

"But you said-"

"I wasn't planning on it, but if you're going to be there, maybe with a six pack – just saying – I'll be there too."

"Oh, is that so?" Harrington put a fucking good brave face, but he couldn't hide his relief.

"Yeah, Harrington, it's exactly so." Billy pushed him gently off his locker. "Now if you don't mind, some of us do have to attend classes."

"Shut up!" Harrington's lips twitched slightly and Billy couldn't help the answering smile in reply. Steve ran his fingers through his hair and looked at Billy as searching for something. "See you at nine?"

"Yeah, see you then." Billy turned around to pull out his English notebook and by the time he did so, Harrington was gone. Billy stared at his slumped shoulders as he made his way on the corridors of Hawkins High.

Billy slammed the door of the locker, making a few freshmen jump, and went to his class. It struck him at times how he and Steve Harrington seemed to be the two sides of the same coin. Wilderness raged like a storm inside of Billy, but there was a calm sea inside of Harrington, a deadly calm before the storm. The loneliness pressed against the wilderness and the sea, ramping up that thrilling energy that existed in both of them. Billy craved to taste that energy from Steve's lips, lick it from his skin, mark it as his own. The impossibility of it added all the more fuel to his desire.

To Billy's surprise, time actually flew by. He had decided not to go home after work because his father might have found a way to ruin fucking everything so he just called quickly from the garage and gave him a bullshit excuse that he was going out with Benny and Lennie after work. His father wasn't satisfied with the excuse, but it seemed manly hang outs were accepted so he didn't grumble much. The fact that it was Friday also helped so when Billy hung up the phone, he smiled like the cat got the cream.

He washed quickly because smelling of grease wasn't sexy and hey, Billy had always aimed to at least be fucking sexy. He passed his damp fingers through his hair, attempting at curling it slightly more. He took his flannel shirt on but didn't button up and pulled his winter coat over it.

"Someone's got a date," Benny observed when Billy made his way to the Camaro. Something constricted in his chest, a sharp knife of self-doubt.

"Yeah, old man, you should try that sometime," he hollered keeping his back to his boss the whole time. Billy was good at lying but not that good. Not with the people he cared about anyway.

"I get some on regular basis, Hargrove. Unlike others."

"Fuck you, Hammond!"

"You too, Hargrove!" Benny shouted back in between bouts of laughter. Billy slammed the door of the Camaro and revved the engine before deciding better, opened his window and flipped his boss. Benny laughed at him and flipped him off too. Sometimes Hammond acted like a twelve-year-old. Worse than Billy!

Motorhead blared into his car as he made his way to the quarry. *Ace of Spades* encompassed the energy of the night perfectly – Billy slammed his hand following the delirious rhythm of the song as he sang along it.

The night had fallen over Hawkins like muffled snow over the barren trees, thick with winter dreams and soundless traps. The same sort of familiar stillness inhabited the quarry, at odds with the soft music

that could be heard. Harrington's Beemer was parked to the side, barely visible, in the same place where Billy had apologized to him some time ago. Roxanne was floating from the speakers and the headlights splashed their beams over Harrington, who sat slightly slumped on the hood of his car, already on the second beer. He smiled when he saw Billy, ignoring this scowling and offering him a beer straight away.

"Fucking *Roxanne*, man? Really?" Billy grumbled as he took the offered beer and jumped on the hood of the Beemer next to the other boy. The entire move seemingly drained the tension out of the other boy because Harrington almost melted into the goddamn hood and pressed their shoulders together.

Something was wrong with Steve Harrington. Billy wasn't going to pry into his problems – everyone was entitled to their own privacy and fuck if Billy didn't love his intimacy more than anyone else – but he was going to make King Steve forget about himself tonight.

"For a person that hates The Police, you know an awful lot of things about them. I hope you realize your own bullshit." Steve made a gimme sign and Billy sighed put on, but offered his own cigarette and lit up another one for himself.

"Man, seriously, the purpose of the mixtape was to teach you better music. How come you keep coming up with this fucking bullshit?"

"And I appreciated the lesson, as per my fucking Led Zeppelin and Joy Division albums that I've been listening for the past month," Harrington grumbled and knocked their shoulders together again. "Though I was surprised you put The Ramones on it." Billy choked on the beer and it took a while to swallow past the sudden lump in his throat. He thanked whoever was out there that it was dark and the other boy could see the sudden flush. "*I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend* really doesn't seem like your type of song," the young man remarked innocently and honestly, Billy didn't know whether he should just hurl himself into the quarry and spare himself the embarrassment, or just curse Harrington's annoying obliviousness. "But I liked it. I liked it a lot, though you know, if I listen to your favorite songs, then you have to listen to mine as well."

“Are you going to make me a mixtape, princess?”

“How come it sounds so – I don't know – leery when you say it, but when you gave it to me, it was just a fucking outstanding lesson in music?” Harrington frowned at him and took a long sip of his beer.

“How about this then?” Billy said suddenly struck by inspiration. “You tell me why the fuck we're here tonight, freezing our butts, and I promise you I'll listen to a whole new album from a band of your own choice, even if it's The fucking Police or Fleetwood Mac or whatever other pop pretending to be rock bullshit band you want to give me.”

“You are a fucking snob when it comes to music, aren't you?” Harrington's lips twitched again in that mesmerizing way of his as if he had discovered something slightly amusing about Billy but that secret was going to be kept close to his heart.

“Fuck off! I'm not a snob!”

“Yeah, you kind of are.” Harrington took another drag of his cigarette and flicked the rest of it into the snow. “But okay, I'll bite.” That wild thing inside of Billy circled now, smelling blood in the air. “However, I want to change the rules of the game.”

“I didn't know we were playing a game, princess,” Billy mumbled, suddenly wary of where the things were going.

“Relax, my lord.” Steve's smile sharpened. “I will keep the initial bargain, but let's add a twist to it if you will. I get to ask a question about you and you get to ask a question about me. We have some beer to drink and a night to kill. Might as well make it fun.”

“Sounds all right to me.” His agreement came quick and unhesitating. “I hope you brought more beer though because, between you and me, we might finish this faster than you'd think, pretty boy.”

“Yeah, I have two more packs in the trunk.”

“Okay.” Billy crashed the can in his hand and threw it down. He took out his pack of cigarettes and took two out. Lighting them both, he gave one to Harrington and one kept to himself. With a new can of

beer in his hand and Harrington plastered on his right side, the night began to look better and better.

But the storm was brewing. He could see it in Harrington's eyes, in the way he furrowed his eyebrows as if searching for the perfect answers and coming up with none. The air was crisp and fresh around them and it sparked with something unrestrained. The wilderness was alive. But so was the sea.

"Before you came here, just a few months before," Harrington began at last, "Nancy's best friend, Barb, died in my pool." He took a long drag of his smoke and Billy watched the orange light splashing Harrington's face, casting a harsher shade at the corners of his lips. "I still have nightmares about it."

"Who killed her?"

"A monster."

"What kind of monster?"

"The real kind." Harrington took another sip of his beer. "I can't say much because they made me sign so much confidentiality stuff that my head is still spinning. But let me tell you, there's some fucked up shit in this world and monsters are fucking real."

"Yeah, I know, pretty boy, I live with one." The words caused Harrington to turn his head so fast, Billy actually heard the crack in his neck and winced in sympathy. Harrington's eyes had widened in astonishment and his mouth had fallen slightly open. He made such a fucking stupid face, it actually pissed off Billy. But shit! He had to open his fucking mouth and tell that shit to Harrington. Just how many fucking people he could tell before this whole situation would explode in his fucking face and his father would ensure that he regretted this confidence for the rest of his goddamn life?

Billy huffed annoyed and made an attempt to get off the hood of the car. Immediately, his friend grabbed him by the arm and held tight. That gesture more than anything annoyed the shit out of Billy, who jerked away hard. They were both breathing hard now, sharp intakes of crisp air. But Harrington's eyes were burning like coal into the

dead night and not even the still night could muffle the life out of them.

“If the next words from your mouth are going to be *I'm sorry*, I'll fucking punch you in the face, Harrington.” The other boy swallowed hard but nodded softly. “People like you think that if they see a terrible thing in their lives, others don't get a right to define what terrible is in the first place. No one had to kill a girl in my goddamn pool to realize that monsters are real, princess, because I've been living with one my whole goddamn life.” He grabbed his can and drained it in one go then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and slammed the can against a tree. Its empty sound reverberated in Billy.

“Max?” Harrington asked in a small voice as if he wasn't sure whether he was allowed to ask questions about the unexpected truth.

“No.” The fight drained out of Billy then and he leaned against the windscreen. “For now anyway.”

“For now?” The horror was palpable in those two little words. What a fucking bleeding heart Harrington was! It pissed off Billy even more.

“Yeah, pretty boy, for now. Do you think a shit of a monster like my dad is going to stop at me? What exactly do you think is going to happen once I leave the house? Once his whole attention will focus on Max? Do you see her respecting his rules? Do you see her staying away from Sinclair and Henderson and all the others? Because I fucking don't see that happening! And your bat won't mean shit in the real world!”

“Fuck! Fuck!” Harrington scrubbed harshly his face. He seemed genuinely upset that horrible shit might happen to Max, and Billy pressed harder against the cool metal behind his back. He squeezed the can in his hand harder. He fucking envied Max in that moment. He fucking envied her so fucking much! What did she do to deserve such fucking undying support? She had known these guys just for a few short months and she already had them at her beck and call.

“Hey, Harrington, this fucking game was supposed to be fun,” Billy tried for brash, but it came out pissed as fuck and ready to fucking

leave. He couldn't even fucking help himself, what the fuck made him think that he was capable of helping anyone else? Billy had enough of this shit. He attempted to get up when Harrington clutched hard at his wrist. He tried to wrench away but Harrington's hold on him was tight. Billy turned only to be faced with the other boy's bright eyes, much closer than he expected. Billy could almost taste his breath and it was fucking exhilarating.

"I have nightmares that leave me breathless and unable to fall asleep again," Harrington confessed, his voice hoarse and tight. "They don't happen often but when they do, they leave me dazed for days and unable to cope with just about anything. I mean, fucking thirteen-year-olds are braver than me and believe me, I'd know it because I spend a lot of time with them."

"What are you doing?" The question cracked him open and raw, ready to bleed.

"I'm telling you one thing about me," Steve spoke softly into the silence between them as if afraid that Billy might laugh at him.

"What are your nightmares about?" He swallowed hard, allowing Harrington's hold to carry on. They both needed it.

"Monsters. Fairytale monsters. With rows upon rows of teeth and mouths like opened flowers. They'd get me or someone I care about and there'd be nothing I could do." Everything was coming out like a fevered rush, the horror of those dreams pressing against their chests and hearts and Billy couldn't help but make a small soothing sound as he covered Harrington's hand on his wrist with his own. "Other times," Steve whispered after a while, "they'd chase me again and again, always close but not close enough and those are the worst."

"Did I give you nightmares?" Billy squeezed that hand tighter when Steve didn't seem to comprehend the sense of the question. "I beat the shit out of you that night at Byers' place. Did I give you nightmares too?"

"Yes." Those three words pressed like an anvil against his consciousness. Something terrible and foul suddenly clenched tightly to Billy's chest. "You'd not stop," Steve added, liquid eyes and aflame,

burning Billy with their truth. "You'd killed me more often than not. Or I'd kill you, which was always worse."

"Fuck, Steve, how could that be worse?" His voice was shot to hell, he could barely recognize the words, jumbled by the misery that suddenly was at home inside of him. Or maybe it had never left him in the first place.

"I wanted to protect the kids, but I didn't want to hurt you." Steve's eyes were wide and bright. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Maybe, but people keep hurting you, Steve." Billy cupped Harrington's cheek, thumb resting just under the eye as if it was its rightful place. "Wheeler, Byers, Tommy and your other friends. Me. Mostly just me."

"You apologized and you meant it." Steve closed his eyes for a moment. He took a shuddering breath then stood a little straighter and opened his eyes again. "So I forgive you."

"Fuck, Steve!" The words out of his mouth before he could stop them. Groaning, he hid his face into Harrington's shoulder, the little shit actually chuckling.

"You realize you called me Steve like three times now, right?"

"You're fucking counting now, pretty boy?" Billy mumbled. Although he realized a long time ago that Steve was not the type to hold a grudge and that he somehow must have forgiven him at some point, the fact that he had specifically said it to him made Billy warm and fuzzy around the edges. He really couldn't care less about being girly about it. Or a pussy. Fuck, this boy was going to be the death of him!

"I sure am." Steve's arm came around his shoulders, and Billy couldn't breathe. "I didn't anticipate this night going so well."

"You're a charmer, Harrington."

"I know, right?"

"Okay," Billy took a deep breath and pulled away. His poor monster heart could only take so much. "Enough with this girly shit. I need a

smoke and a drink. Asap.”

“Fine, your highness. Let me grab the other packs from the trunk.”

Steve jumped down the hood and went at the back of the car, opening the trunk. Billy quickly scrubbed his face, hands slightly shaking. Steve slammed the trunk shut and came back on Billy's side, dropping the six packs down next to the wheel.

“What the fuck, Harrington?” But he didn't get any answer as Steve opened the driver's door and cranked up the volume, before straightening up again. He grinned even wider when he saw Billy's face and started to slow dancing. “No, we're not fucking doing that!” Billy said horrified, but Steve was already shaking his hips, his legs moving to the rhythm of the song. *In you I've found a story I want to keep hearing,/ In you I see all colors/ not just black or white/ In you I find a reason and hope for all dreamers*, the guy kept saying. Billy was horrified to see that he was actually keeping the happy rhythm with his right foot. Harrington saw that and laughed out loud.

“Come on, Hargrove! Are you afraid that I'm going to find out that you're shit when it comes to dancing?”

“No, this is not going to work on me, pretty boy! No fucking way in hell, I'd dance to this shit!”

“Come on, Hargrove! There's no one around to see you lose manly points. Or that you're shit at dancing.”

“Fuck you! I'm not shit at dancing!”

“Then prove it.”

And really what Billy was supposed to do? He jumped off the hood as Harrington hollered happily, hand thrown up in victory.

“Fine!” He shouted back. “But we're taking turns, Harrington. I'm picking up the next song.”

“Great!”

Billy took his coat off and Harrington followed suit, both of them

losing themselves for a while to the rhythm of the songs that followed. After *Love & Pride* ended, Billy picked *Paranoid* from Black Sabbath, then Harrington chose *Hungry Like a Wolf* from a band called Duran Duran and seriously, Billy's rocker heart had been immediately broken and killed off. To wash his sins away, he chose *Dance* from Motorhead and he hoped that the gods of rock wouldn't be awake tonight or he'd burn into rock hell for sure.

But it was when Harrington chose *Dancing with Myself* from Billy Idol that Billy lost it. If there was one song that was perfect for Steve Harrington to dance, then that would be *Dancing with Myself*. He was free in movements and wild, but not Billy-like-wild, a cornered animal always caged, but rather hungry for a taste of pleasure and unrestrained. Billy kept getting distracted by Steve's wild bangs bouncing to the rhythm of the song and by the shaky moves Harrington called 'dance'. Lips slightly parted and twitched in a self-deprecating smile. With his beautiful eyes half-closed and twinkling in the darkness, suddenly the *I want* that had played on a loop in Billy's mind throughout the night had turned into *I must have*.

Billy had always been a fucking time bomb, but he'd never felt so acutely like one until he got into Harrington's space. There was a frightening certainty that he was going to fuck things up for good with Steve this time, but there was heat pooling down in his belly, a sort of hunger that could never be assuaged in a thousand years and he'd never got what he wanted. If he could just make this final push if he could have just this.

Just this.

Billy almost felt like crying as Harrington watched him open and unguarded, waiting for Billy to make up his mind.

"I'm going to do something really stupid, Steve," he said, voice cracking but he couldn't *not* do it. He couldn't. "And I want you to know that you can punch me afterward. I won't retaliate. You can punch me, but I need to."

"What, Billy? What is it that you need?"

The press of lips came as a shock, jolting the both of them. Billy

didn't dare to wrap his arms around Steve, he just pressed his lips against the other boy's a little harder. And he could die. He could fucking die right now and he wouldn't care. Because it was glorious. He leaned back a little, weary and afraid. He was actually shaking, hands fisted by his side, heart pounding loud. So fucking loud. And throughout it all, Steve didn't fucking move – just held tight, frozen, as the final notes of the song died in their ears.

“You can punch me, Steve,” Billy whispered softly, something raw being scrapped open in him.

“Shut up! God, shut the fuck up!” Steve said and telegraphing his moves, he grabbed fistfuls of Billy's shirt and pulled hard. Their bodies slammed against each other hard and painful, but then Steve leaned forward and pressed their lips again, uninhibited and famished. An electric shock ran through Billy's body, making him pull even closer to Steve, hands finally able to move. He dug under Steve's jumper and splayed them on the sweaty skin of his lower back. Steve let out a little moan of pleasure and Billy swallowed it, swallowed it all.

Another shock of pleasure pulsed through his body as Steve moved their bodies until he could rest against his car as Billy pushed hard into his body, a thigh in between his legs. They both gasped in pleasure and Billy dived in, this time to lick across the fullness of Steve's lips. And the miracle of it all was that Steve let him. He opened his mouth like he was starved and Billy needed to taste it. The next kiss turned desperate and aggressive, Billy's hands clamped harder against the warm skin, moving on his back. Steve's hands let go of the shirt and moved across his chest, possessive, as if suddenly marking a private property.

Billy was overwhelmed by the little noises that Steve was making, little pulses of pleasure that traveled all over his body and fuck, they should take it easy. But Billy was greedy. So greedy all his fucked up life. Their hips started to move and the pleasure electrified them. Steve turned desperate, louder moans that seemed to be punched out of him and Billy swallowed them all. He kissed and kissed Steve with the desperation of a man knowing that this might not happen again.

He scrapped his teeth against Steve's jaw, licking his pulse point.

Steve tilted his head, giving Billy more room just as his own hands came around Billy's shoulders, the heat of them searing and tight. Harrington held on the shoulders, short nails scratching and marking him. And Billy was so close, so fucking close. Months of not fucking anyone, weeks of spending time with Steve without being able to do anything. Pleasure ran through his veins thick as molasses, pressing tighter and tighter. Steve was no better, moving against Billy's thigh much faster and fuck, but Billy had to kiss him again. Hard and bruising.

He greedily kissed Steve even as he shuddered in pleasure and came, but he didn't expect Steve to grab fistfuls of his shirt again and pin his body tighter against him.

"Come for me, Billy," Harrington whispered dirty into his ear and when he bit his earlobe, Billy couldn't hold it in him anymore. He groaned and came in his jeans like he hadn't done it since he was fourteen. When he came back to himself, he was still clutching at Steve's lower back and the other boy was still holding him tight. Neither had let go, their breathing suddenly harsh in the dead cold of the night. Billy pressed his forehead against Steve's shoulder and took a deep breath. He wanted to remember that moment – Steve's little sharp intakes, his salty sweat, his hands possessive against his chest. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Steve Harrington held him tight like he owned Billy Hargrove, like Steve was the one true king and fuck if it wasn't true when it came to Billy.

"Jesus Christ, Hargrove!" Harrington whispered harshly against his lips. "Jesus fucking Christ!"

"I'm not–"

"If your next words are going to be *I'm not queer*, I'll fucking deck you," Harrington said and stared back at Billy. Nobody, not even his father, had ever made Billy feel flayed open and left him exposed like Steve did at that particular moment.

"I was going to say I'm not sorry," Billy answered at last. "But that you can fucking punch me if you want to."

“Does it look like I want to punch you?”

“Well, no, but-”

“Fucking shut up, Hargrove, and kiss me again.”

“You'd like that, pretty boy, wouldn't you?”

“Shut up!”

And this time it was Steve who surged and kissed the hell out of Billy.

Billy had never had this. Never had a person that would kiss him as if he was worshipped, as if he was a wonder to be explored. Steve was ripping him apart with his kisses, with his little swipes of the tongue, with those sweet noises, then putting him back together.

And Billy gave himself to him. Gave him all.

~O~

It was almost four o'clock in the morning when Billy managed to open the window to his bedroom with a big fucking grin on his face and slip inside. The whole house was quiet but he stood a long time crouched underneath the window afterward, waiting for everything to fall apart and for his father to switch on the light. After a while, when he had finished counting to a hundred, he breathed quietly as he took off his clothes. He had to hide his jeans and maybe wash them tomorrow, sometime in the afternoon when Susan and Neil would be undoubtedly going out as usual. He grabbed some tissues and wiped himself around the groin area with a fucking stupid smile on his face, then pulled on the sweats. He didn't bother with a t-shirt, just laid down in bed and stared at the ceiling.

They had kissed until their lips turned raw and tender from so much kissing, but Steve was so fucking addictive. His full lips demanded to be kissed again and again and again. At some point they had moved the proceedings inside of the Beemer, laying on the back seat. Steve had kept his eyes open, gently cupping Billy's cheeks as he had leaned forward and kissed him again. Then slowly, those nimble fingers had traveled to the back of his neck and grabbed Billy's hair,

making him tilt his head just so Steve could kiss him some more.

Billy smiled again.

He had never had an experience when the first kiss could be described as sparks flying everywhere, but Steve Harrington was one hell of a kisser. Billy turned on his stomach and hid his grin in the pillow, hands underneath it. He closed his eyes and shuddered again. He didn't know what awaited him the next day – Steve might panic and change his mind, calling Billy a faggot and punch him in the face. The bleakest scenarios seemed the most real to Billy and yet, he couldn't forget the way Steve kissed him one more time before they both drifted to their respective cars.

Maybe there was hope after all.

The sweet thoughts of having a repeat with Steve Harrington lulled him to sleep, for once not paying attention to the sounds inside the house. He had almost fallen asleep when suddenly the weight of a knee woke him jarringly. The knee pressed hard against his back, pinning him further into the mattress, cutting off his air supply. He tried to buckle off, panicking now, his hands prisoners underneath him. He was entirely helpless.

But it was the unexpected and cruel whisper that put an end to his struggle. His feeble attempts from shrinking back from his assailant were futile because his attacker was incredibly skilled at getting Billy.

“I promised I'd get you in your sleep, boy.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Edit: If you're reading this story in one sitting, I think now might be a good time for a break. Get up, drink some water, walk around. The story will be waiting for you when you're coming back.
(21/10/18)

Apologies for the delay, my lovelies. I got the flu from hell. :(

Thank you as always to [lambchop33](#) for the beta. All

remaining mistakes are mine and mine alone.

I may or may not have listened to Joy Division's *Atmosphere* (1980) on loop during the Harringrove scene, that's all I can say. I love that song. :) Also, this chapter should be called *when you find the perfect song for them to dance to but it's five years later*. Goddamn you, historical accuracy. :(

Here's another timeline for you if you're interested:

The song playing in the kitchen when Billy wakes up is actually Duran Duran's *The Reflex* (1983).

Duran Duran *Hungry Like a Wolf* (1982)

Billy Idol *Dancing with Myself* (1981)

Motorhead *Ace of Spades* (1980)

Motorhead *Dance* (1980)

The Police *Roxanne* (1978)

Black Sabbath *Paranoid* (1970)

King *Love and Pride* (1984)

I've added another chapter to the final count just because of the last chapter, which is so long, I had to split it in two. Also, there's going to be an epilogue, which I have already written because I roll that way. :)))

And if you've made this far, as always, thank you for reading. :)

4. Saint Joseph

Summary for the Chapter:

In which it is hard for Billy to deal with anything in the aftermath of his father's attack, but it is even harder to accept that he is no longer alone.

Notes for the Chapter:

Saint Joseph is a patron saint offering protection to people in doubt and to their interior souls.

The phone was ringing in the house. Somewhere far far away.

The metallic taste in his mouth worsened the sensation that his head was full of cotton. He could hear someone's murmurs but they were talking as if from a great distance and he couldn't make himself move. He hadn't moved since his father had left the room. His limbs had been frozen in that grotesque and failed attempt to free himself. His dislocated shoulder burnt, the acidic taste of its familiarity clogging his throat. He hadn't dared to move after the slightest twitch of muscle caused him to groan like a dying animal. The cloggy blood at the base of his skull pressed tightly against his need to budge. His father must have caught a bit of skin with the scissors when he had succeeded in cutting off his hair last night.

Along the years, his own skin had felt like a prison to Billy – all the bruises, the scrapped elbows, the dislocated shoulder (once), the broken fingers (twice), the twisted ankles (three times), swollen and bruised eyes (time and time again) and a broken arm and two cracked ribs (one memorable time with far-reaching consequences). He had elevated owning and coping with the pain to a state of art. Each year had added more and more to his pain threshold.

However now, his father had touched something indispensable inside of him. Whatever had been left of him after so much pain had been trampled on and squished to death. And the abruptness of it all had been the worst because it proved to Billy that he had been slacking.

It hurt breathing and it hurt thinking so he let himself float.

A soft knock on someone's door. Maybe his. The swift click of a handle being turned. Muscles tensed like tight and rusty springs, fear running through his veins like syrupy poison.

"Billy?" Max's voice washed in soft waves over him. "It's Benny for you. Says you're late."

Heart pinned tight against his chest. Benny with his kind eyes and silly jokes, with his hard-on for Springsteen and his competent hands, giving him a chance even when he didn't deserve it. Benny with his high hopes for Billy and his generous affection. Benny had given him something that Billy had never had before.

He'd never have it again.

"Tell him I'm not feeling well," he croaked from under the blanket with which his father covered him as if hiding a piece of shit that didn't deserve any respect. Not even to be buried away in the cemetery of life. But it must not have been enough.

A horrific gasp smashed itself against the walls.

"Billy! You're bleeding." It sounded much closer now, though the blood rushed to his head, roaring in his head. He still hadn't moved when Max slowly pulled away the blanket and she actually moaned like a mad animal about to be put down. But the horror of it still couldn't persuade him to open his eyes. He didn't want to see this new strange person his father had moulded him into just a few hours ago.

"I'm fine," he groaned. "Go away."

"Who did this to you?"

"Who the fuck do you think, Max?" He was fading away, becoming that old person again, the one he had begun to despise, but that had kept him safe. He could feel himself inhabiting it again like an old t-shirt not worn for a while.

"I'm going to tell Benny."

"Don't you fucking dare!" Billy managed to open his eyes and stared up at Max. He regretted the move instantly as she looked gutted, her beautiful blue eyes liquid and threatening to spill. "If you do that, Benny is going to kill dad and I don't want him to go to jail for that piece of shit. Just tell him I'm not feeling well."

"You're bleeding and you're covered in bruises," she replied harshly and a tear broke the dam, spilling messily on her right cheek. "I'm not leaving you alone, asshole. Tell me who to call or I tell Benny the truth." A beat too long, silence spreading too fast, rolling over them like thunderous waves. He really didn't want Benny involved because his reaction would be swift and unequivocal. "Neil isn't at home, Billy. They called him at work. I heard him saying to Susan yesterday evening. My mum just left for shopping." Another tear spilled, wiped harshly and fast. As if she wasn't entitled to cry. "Just tell me who to call," she pleaded, her voice impossibly childish.

Steve Harrington, I want Steve, his mind screamed. *Call Steve*. He wanted his gentle hands and his fire. A repeat of yesterday's performance – but that couldn't be anymore. Steve didn't need a fucked up person like Billy, Steve deserved better. He slipped into his old persona like old clothes still fitting perfectly.

"I don't need anyone," his voice sounded better, not so broken. He cleared it before adding even more decisively, "Don't tell anyone and don't fucking call anyone, Maxine. Get out!"

"Billy-" Her face stricken, voice shot to hell.

"Get the fuck out of my room!" He snapped, closing his eyes and refusing to deal with this shit again. "Get the fuck out, Maxine!" He didn't care whether Max was upset with him anymore. He heard the door being flung and Billy knew that all the words in the world couldn't fix that anymore.

But he didn't care. He didn't. He'd build his walls again, faster and higher. Thicker and harder, deeper and stronger so that no one would go past them ever again. He'd wrap himself in that familiar anger and he'd build himself hard again. He'd make this fury his own again, no regrets anymore – there was no light at the end of the tunnel so he'd just let himself set it free. He'd let himself drown in it rather than be

this fucking pussy again. Not this fucking pussy still bleeding from his scalp, haircut and ribs purple. Not this fucking pussy that still felt like crying.

Billy pulled his right hand from under the pillow. The jarring pain in the other shoulder didn't matter. He fisted his hand and hit his head hard with his knuckles. He screamed over and over into his pillow, but no tear left his eyes. He then grabbed a fistful of hair with his hand and pulled tight over and over again. It didn't matter now – the mullet was gone anyway. Why had he been so fucking stupid? So fucking complacent? Because he thought that Sheriff Hopper and Benny Hammond had been enough to protect him. He thought because he showed responsibility and respect, his father would show mercy and stop. Because he thought that one kiss from Steve Harrington and a fucking orgasm could cure his entire life of abuse.

Billy bit his lip hard. How fucking naïve on his part! He stewed in his own fury and impotence as fear drowned his sorrows.

It could have been decades or hours or minutes later, Billy couldn't tell anymore when he heard his door opened again.

"Max, I told you to leave me alone," he sneered, though his voice was muffled and he couldn't be heard properly. She ignored him and opened his wardrobe. She must have pulled out some clothes. That annoyed him even more, so he snapped at her. "What part of fucking get out didn't you understand the first time?"

"Get dressed. I'm taking you to the hospital." Benny's voice cut deep as if he had taken a blunt and rusty knife and pulled it through each and every heartstring that Billy had left owning. But he had given Billy enough of a jolt to make him open his eyes and scowl at the man sitting down at the end of the bed. Benny was dressed in his mechanic uniform and while his calm eyes didn't betray anything, the bitter and unhappy twist of his lips meant that he was in for blood.

"I'm not going to any hospital," Billy hissed and attempted to grab the blanket and pull it back over him but Benny snatched it away.

"You're still bleeding. You need a chest x-ray to check your ribs because you might have one or two cracked ones by the bruises

you're currently sporting and that shoulder looks dislocated."

"Why the fuck do you care? Get the fuck out of my house!" Billy's failed attempt at kicking him with his left foot shook his shoulder and he whimpered in pain. Benny's face didn't change. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"I'm getting tired of you playing the same tune, Hargrove," Benny said firmly, something brutal alight in his eyes. "If you don't want me to go and kill your good for nothing father, you need to come with me to the hospital now. Otherwise, I'll fuck him up so bad, he won't know what hit him."

The horrible thing about it? For a second Billy craved it – he wanted his father to have his ass handed back to him, he wanted to see him humiliated and broken down just like he had been over and over again. But Benny Hammond didn't deserve to have a fuck up like Billy to ruin his life.

"Go away, Benny, you have had enough of this shit. Just forget about me and-"

"Stop saying that!" Benny sneered and in a surprisingly agile move, he knelt at the side of the bed, his giant hand splaying across Billy's lower back. The simple comfort of it made Billy light headed with the sudden relief that it brought. He hadn't realized how tensed he had kept himself until Benny Hammond had touched him. "I'm not going away, your sister isn't going away, you're not alone this time, Billy. I'm not leaving you alone. I won't go away." Those huge fingers pressed grounding against his skin.

"Yeah, and where the fuck were you when he did this to me last night?" The words spilled out of him viciously like a whip and he enjoyed tremendously to see Benny blanch. Yeah, Hammond with his big talk but confront him and he'd leave Billy alone. "Where were you when I needed you? Where were you when he cut my hair?" He'd leave Billy faster than anyone else. He'd-

"I'm sorry, kid," Benny's apology absolutely gutted Billy. "I'm sorry that I wasn't there. I wish I could have been. I wish I could be your father instead of this pitiful excuse of a human being. But I promise you this is done. This is the last time he'll ever touch you." His other

hand brushed Billy's cheek gently as if any sudden movement might crack him. Billy hadn't even realized that he had been crying.

"He cut my hair." The words sounded as if they had been punched out of him. In any other circumstance, Billy would have felt horrified at the lack of restraint, and it wasn't even about the fucking hair. Hair grew back. It was about what the hair had meant for him – a sign of mourning his mom, a material distance between what his father had wanted him to become and what he had always been. And now it was gone.

"I know," Benny muttered kindly. His giant hand ran quietly through his hair.

He didn't say *It will grow again*.

He didn't say *It's fucking stupid to care so much about a mullet*.

He was there, offering comfort and support.

Benny Hammond was there for Billy in a way nobody had ever been before.

"I shouted at her." Billy swallowed thickly, throat suddenly tight.

"I think she understood this time." Benny's lips twitched in a pale resemblance of a smile. "Now you either willingly come with me to the hospital or I'll carry you. Bride-style or potato-sack-style. Your choice, Hargrove."

"You're a fucking pain in the ass, Hammond," he said, but then he attempted to move and immediately shouted in misery. His left shoulder was burning, a deep ache that seemed to reverberate all the way up to his skull. Benny was quick in moves and slightly bent to keep Billy steady as he tried to stand on his shaky legs. It was a futile effort, to begin with, and Billy leaned heavily into Benny. "You'd better not drop me, Hammond, or I swear the God, I'll fucking end you!"

"Please, Hargrove, as if! Your five feet have nothing on me, kid."

"Fuck, I hate you so fucking much right now," Billy groused but still

grabbed tighter on to Hammond when Benny leaned over and snatched a grey hoodie that he must have taken out from the wardrobe when he first got in and gently draped it on Billy's naked shoulders.

"You always say that." Benny walked slowly towards the door waiting for Billy to catch up with the movements of his shaky legs, back stiffening all over again. He avoided looking back at his bed.

"Because it's true," Billy gasped as they made their way out of his room, Max waiting for them at the entrance, clearly shaken. She was still dressed in her pajamas, hair messy and eyes wide. She seemed huddled into a corner, unsure whether she should open the door or not.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," Billy mumbled.

"You're an asshole, that's just old news," she replied, wringing her hands, not knowing whether she was allowed to touch him. Suddenly, Max looked like the child that she was and Billy's heart was breaking for her.

"Hey, midget, I'll be fine. I've had worse." She blanched upon hearing his words and Billy bit his lip again.

"Yeah, somehow that doesn't make me feel better," Max said as her eyes blazed. "I'll catch up with you later, okay? I can't leave the house without mum knowing, but as soon as I can, I'll be with you."

"But you have the Dungeons and Dragons marathon today," Billy turned his head towards her slightly as they were almost out on the door now.

"Shut up, dickhead, you're more important than a fucking game," Max hissed and she reminded him the way she had been that night at the Byers' place when she had threatened him. She looked exactly as before: a young warrior princess, unafraid and unabashed in her loyalty and affection. Astonishingly enough, those were directed towards him now and something tiny bloomed inside of Billy.

"You have my number, yeah?" Benny asked Max as she followed

them outside and opened the passenger door so that Billy could get in with Hammond's help. He squirmed a few times as the most comfortable position for him seemed to elude him.

"Yes," she nodded as she hovered over Billy, hands constantly reaching for him but not touching.

"If we're not home, Tamara is there. She'll pick up and let you know of any news she's got." Benny went round the truck and got in. He turned towards Billy and pulled the seat belt as wide as he could before he fastened it around Billy.

"Thank you." Max hesitated, her face set in a permanent scowl and back tensed. But then she leaned forward and kissed Billy's right cheek gently. "See you soon, big brother," she whispered and slammed the door shut before he could say anything else. Billy watched her as Benny started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot. He watched her until she got smaller and smaller then disappeared completely as they took a corner. Fuck, he didn't deserve Max!

Billy leaned heavily against the leather chair and closed his eyes in a poor attempt to ignore the pain, chest burning like fire. It felt as if someone had poured hot tar on his shoulder and the shallow breaths that he was currently taking didn't help to alleviate the pain. Billy wondered briefly if something ever would after this.

"I don't want to give explanations," he said, jaw tight and clenched teeth. Each bump on the road was a personal offense to him. "I won't file a complaint against my father, I won't accuse him of anything."

"So what are you going to say?" The cold calm that sipped through Benny's voice was alarming.

"I'll tell them I fell down the stairs." Billy bit his lip. His hands had begun to shake, the shadow of his father looming dark and frightening even in this fucking car, where he should feel safe. A scream of helplessness still lodged inside his throat and the more he spoke, the more he was tempted to set it free.

"And the hair?"

"A poor attempt on my part to try a new haircut." The tension radiating from Benny was palpable and rolled in anxious waves over Billy. He opened his eyes and turned his head towards the driver's seat. Benny's shoulders were hunched and his hands white-knuckled as they held on the steering wheel like a life-line.

"How many times did you fall down the stairs?" Benny asked, voice carefully blank.

"More times than I could count." Billy rubbed against his forehead with his right hand. "The last time I did, I ended up two days in the hospital, then we moved here." Benny's mouth crumpled in unhappiness as he shook his head in frustration. "Whatever you're thinking, amigo," Billy said hesitantly, biting his lip, "don't do it. I don't want to cause you any problems."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Benny grumbled but didn't glance at him. Billy's stomach bottomed up.

"See that you don't," Billy said more firmly this time, chin jutting out.

"Hey, I let you fall down the stairs, you let me mind my own business, okay?" Benny glanced at him this time and Billy sucked in a breath. His eyes were dark and thunderous as if he had swallowed up a whole hurricane of destruction inside of him. Billy looked down and away, closing his eyes again.

Nonetheless, he couldn't pretend he didn't see that hurricane. Billy could feel Benny's wrath in his very bones. And he was wary of it.

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Awareness slipped around him like a snug blanket and Billy woke up foggily, blinking in confusion before remembering where he was. The late afternoon sun had painted him in orange and the fading light added to this easy feeling of being safe. He was laying on Benny's monstrous couch (it was paisley – no one should ever stand for such a pattern) and a fluffy blue quilt was slung over him, keeping him warm and relaxed. The medication that Dr. Leonard had given him must have knocked him out pretty well, but he didn't care. The living room was silent around him, just a clock in the hallway ticking the

seconds away. He could hear the soft radio in the kitchen and Benny and Tamara's hushed voices. The huge pillow propped him well enough so each breath wouldn't be an agonizing moment of fire and hurt. The headache had decreased to a bearable level and in spite of his stomach rumbling in discontent, Billy let himself sink further into this comfortable sense of safety.

He was still wearing Benny's t-shirt that seemed ten times bigger than him and he was in a deep need of a shower. As he was debating the merits of a shower over getting something to eat, Tamara entered the room quietly but when she saw him awake, she smiled softly at him.

"I'm sorry, I hope I didn't wake you up," she half whispered and came to sit at the edge of the couch. She was dressed in a red turtle-neck and black jeans. Her blonde hair spilled over her shoulders like waves of gold and her big brown eyes were just as kind as Steve's. She rested her small hand on his knee and squeezed lightly.

"No, I was already awake," he replied in a hoarse voice, a funny taste in his mouth. The words sounded curt even to him, so he tried to smile but couldn't make his lips twitch. "I was actually debating whether I should eat first or grab a shower," he offered in the end though it seemed that Tamara wasn't bothered by his attitude.

"I think to eat first. It'll give you strength and it'll help you not faint in the shower."

"I've never fainted in my life, Tamara! Jesus!" Her eyes crinkled with laughter.

"Okay, sorry, manfully lose consciousness then." Tamara rolled her beautiful eyes at him but still grinned cheekily. "I've made lasagne so if you're up for it, I think we should eat now before Benny eats it all."

"I heard that," Benny tossed back from the kitchen, making her chuckle. This time Billy could feel the corners of his mouth sliding up as well.

"Good, that means you might actually leave something for me and Billy," she hollered back and winked at him. "Come on, Sleeping Beauty, let's go before the lasagne disappears." She patted his knee

and stood up to help him make it up. Which wasn't a small feat. The room spun around him at an alarming speed – he closed his eyes and swallowed past the sudden bile in his throat, willing himself to stand tall and not fall over Tamara. When he could finally stop shaking in the effort, he opened his eyes again and let her go.

“You know, you and Benny are made for each other,” Billy grouched as he hesitantly followed Tamara in the kitchen. “You might give a guy a complex with so much talk about his height and his beauty.”

“Who dared offending you, kid?” Billy swung around, a kitchen towel on one of his shoulders, a tiny smudge of the lasagne sauce on his left cheek. “I’ll defend your honor.”

“See what I mean?” Billy pointedly ignored Benny as he grabbed a seat at the already laid table. Tamara laughed at them both. She and Benny moved around the small kitchen with a sense of familiarity that didn't sit well with Billy. He remembered his parents had never had this gentle sort of inhabiting each other's spaces. Along the years, after his mother had been long gone, Billy had wondered if her tensed shoulders hadn't meant that his father had already started on her too, or that he had been gradually poisoning her with the same kind of hate that he had always reserved for Billy.

He kept an eye on Benny. His stature alone should have made him threatening enough. A veteran that had kept himself fit, with his bald head and his thick beard, could easily have made for a very scary character. In contrast to him, Neil Hargrove, although not a big man by any standard definition, was far more menacing and cold than Benny could have ever been. With his well-kept mustache and his icy blue eyes, his hair cut short and his clothes always pressed, not a crinkle on them, his father was by far the most chilling person that Billy had ever met.

He pinched his nose and watched Benny as the man settled the plate in front of Billy, a generous portion of the still hot lasagne resting on it. Billy eyed it warily. Was he supposed to eat all that by himself?

“If you don't like lasagne,” Tamara said, wrongly interpreting his grimace, “don't worry about it. I can make you something else real quick.”

"No, no, that's fine." He swallowed thickly. "It's just I'm not sure I can finish this on my own. It's a bit too much."

"Don't worry, kid," Benny came and sat by his side while Tamara took the front seat. "I love leftovers."

"A bit too much, I might add," Tamara quipped and patted his belly, winking exaggeratedly, then promptly took a piece of potato in her mouth.

"Are you calling me fat?" Benny's genuine outrage made Billy chuckle as he dug into his food relieved. Benny and Tamara kept the funny banter throughout the meal and Billy didn't need to add any input, for which he was grateful. Rules were entirely different at the Hargrove household and it was difficult at times for him to separate between how he should behave at home and how he should behave generally in society.

Still feeling fuzzy from the medication and concentrating hard into putting an effort of not making a mess of himself by eating with just one hand, it took Billy a while to realize that Tamara was asking him a question.

"Sorry," he grimaced unsure of himself, feeling wrong-footed again. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you wanted me to trim your hair a little," Tamara offered gently. "My mother says I'm pretty good with a pair of scissors. But if you don't feel comfortable, we can leave it for another time."

"No, no, I think it's a good idea," Billy said, although the thought alone was enough to make a cold sweat break all over his body. "I don't want to look like a fucking freak on Monday when I go to school."

"You're far from looking like a freak." Tamara grimaced not missing the bitterness in his voice. She took another bite of food. "But I think it needs a bit of arranging so that it might hide most of the stitches."

Oh, yeah, he had needed stitches. Suddenly, Billy didn't feel like eating anymore. He pushed around the remaining bits of lasagne on

his plate, lost to his own thoughts.

The entire morning had the quality of a peculiar out of body experience. Billy had been concentrating so hard to keep his pain in check that he had barely noticed that Chief Hopper had been waiting for them at the emergency room. There were few people waiting to be seen, but Billy was received as soon as he came in and he surrendered exhausted to the gentle hands and the soundless prodding. The doctors didn't ask questions about what caused his wounds, they didn't prod Billy about what he thought of doing when he took a pair of scissors at the back of his neck. They simply asked questions about pain and breathing and stretching for too long. They had been kind and silent and took the chest x-ray with as much comfort as they could possibly offer him.

They stitched Billy up, they advised him that he had three cracked ribs and that they'd heal in time but it would still be quite a lot of time and that it would hurt like a bitch. They took x-rays of his shoulder to see whether he needed surgery, they made him tell them how much it hurt him and they had concluded that he needed a sling for a couple of weeks. They had checked his medical history, they had asked further questions, they had taken photos. They hadn't asked Billy anything else.

During all of this, Billy had watched each movement with utter detachment as if everything was happening to someone else. He hadn't cared much about their care plan for him, mostly because he already knew what he was supposed to do. Wasn't that just fucking sad?

Chief Hopper left soon after the doctors advised that Billy didn't need to be admitted to the hospital, his face dark in anger, barely holding it together, and Benny whispered that Hopper had lost a child and it had been incredibly difficult for him to be in a hospital. Billy's throat tightened uncomfortably, but he nodded along and didn't add anything else to the conversation. Not that he had to.

Tamara had been waiting for them at the apartment and she had briefly hugged Billy before she had helped him settle on the couch. She had helped him take one of Benny's large t-shirts then laid him on the couch. He had closed his eyes as soon as he laid his head to

rest. The sense of safety had been overwhelming.

“Do you want to do it now?” Tamara asked him sweetly, and Billy shook his head slightly.

“Yes, please,” he mumbled and got up from the table. Tamara glanced at Benny and the giant man slowly nodded to her before they both got up.

“Before we go, I'd like to show you something if you don't mind,” Tamara said and carefully wrapped her arm around his shoulders as she pushed him cautiously towards the short hallway.

Benny's apartment was an eclectic mixture of old and new furniture and nothing spoke more about him than the roomy living room – from the old couch (it was huge and really needed to be changed) to the bookshelves in which books mixed with framed photos and other small memorabilia to the TV set and the VHS cassettes, some of them strewn all over the coffee table together with mechanic magazines and other bits and pieces. Billy hadn't seen the other parts of the apartment so when both Tamara and Benny opened a door to his right, he didn't know what to expect.

Then he downright froze.

“So we went with blue for the walls because you told Benny one time that this was one of the reasons why you chose that Camaro,” Tamara spoke softly but quickly as if he might run. Which to be fair, Billy was so fucking tempted to in that particular moment. “And we went with posters from Metallica and Motorhead but of course you're free to add whatever other bands you might like.” There wasn't much: a single bed, a nightstand, a small desk by the window and a big wardrobe on the opposite side. The walls were blue and the posters had been stuck on the wall above his bed. “You like it?”

“We thought you might need a safe space,” Benny mumbled as he gently put his big hand on Billy's right shoulder. And Billy couldn't fucking breathe, he couldn't fucking think. He couldn't, he couldn't. “So a few weeks ago, we decided to convert this bedroom into your room. Tamara was the one that did most of the work, just to let you know. So you can blame her if you actually wanted green or red

walls, instead of blue.” Billy was being taken apart inch by inch, each shallow breath more painful as each second ticked by.

“Thanks for that, you jerk,” he could hear Tamara but he couldn't see them. Eyes wide and staring into space, Billy became aware of his ragged breaths as he wiped at his face with a clammy hand. But the room was still there, laid in front of him, an unprecedented generous gift from two people that had been complete strangers up to a few months ago. Then suddenly a sob wrecked his back. And it was fucking excruciating, especially with cracked ribs. But then another and another and Billy couldn't.

He was flayed open, puss and sorrow mixing into one deep gashing wound. Tamara wrapped her arms around his waist and let him cry on her shoulder. For a petite woman, she sure looked like an Atlas ready to hold on his weight. Billy grabbed a fistful of Benny's t-shirt and held on and on and on, ugly crying, as the large man just tenderly ran his fingers through Billy's hair. He could hear himself making small noises that sounded wrenched out of him with a crowbar as they pushed past his lips. Each breath was agonizing, hazy thoughts of unhappiness spilling out of him.

“We've got you, baby,” Tamara spoke softly in his ear. “We've got you. We're here now. And we're not going anywhere.”

Billy had never realized how much he had fucking missed the tenderness that his mother had been giving him until he was kept afloat by these two people in a room, which they've created especially for him. He hadn't realized how much he had missed the kindness of a parent until Benny had stood by his side at the hospital, and had made sure that he had been okay, even though he hadn't agreed to Billy's intention of not filing a complaint against his father. He hadn't realized how much he had missed being told comforting things until Tamara had held him like a child.

He was still seventeen. At least for a few more months. He was still a child. Why did his father hate him so much? It couldn't have been just because Neil had suspected that Billy was a faggot from a young age. What was wrong with him that it made his own flesh and blood hate him so goddamn much?

What was wrong with him?

“You're asking the wrong question, boy,” Benny pointed out tenderly. Billy must have asked the last one out loud. But he couldn't remember. “You must ask yourself what is wrong with him actually. What small piece is missing in your father to make him act like that towards his own son? The answer will never come to you in this life, but you won't need to know it anyway. For you'll become a better person than your father ever dreamed of becoming. You won't need to prove him wrong because you'll live your life out from his shadow and I don't fucking care if I sound like the goddamn Yoda right now.”

This vicious cycle of gut-wrenching tears and sobs seemed to go on forever until at last, it left Billy exhausted and spent. He glanced at Tamara, a mess of snot and tears and saliva. She smiled down at him through her own tears.

“Sorry,” he croaked as if the sorrow he felt surrounded his throat with barbed wire.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Billy,” she replied kindly and hesitantly let him go.

“I like the room,” he mumbled in lack of anything else to say. “I like it a lot.” He made his fingers let go of Benny's t-shirt one by one.

“I told you,” Tamara looked up at Benny and smirked. His deep frown seemed to ease up a little.

“Good, because you'll have the chance to test the bed tonight.”

“What? But-”

“Don't worry about it. I managed to settle the matter with your old man quite easily.”

“Benny, I hope you didn't fucking do anything stupid.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about, Hargrove. I'm the fucking Yoda of this house.”

“You're the fucking something all right,” Billy managed to find in

himself to reply to Benny's consternation and Tamara's amusement.

"Just for that, tonight I'll start sticking posters with Bruce Springsteen all over the goddamn place."

"Yeah, bring it on, old man. Let's see how that works out for you."

"Fucking Christ!" Benny rolled his eyes at him. "Just get him out of my face, honey, and make him pretty again. Or better yet, I'll go do the dishes and pretend this fucking punk didn't just own my ass."

"You do that, big man, go and cry your manly tears in the kitchen." Tamara chuckled as Benny flipped them both then disappeared into the kitchen. She turned back to him and smiled, wiping his remaining tears. "Okay, let's see what we can do about this, shall we?"

Trying to get a haircut after your own father had almost stabbed you with a pair of scissors? Not so fucking easy. Over and over again, each snip brought a flash from the previous night, the terrible sense of impotence, the horrific violation of his own person. Tamara was quick to catch the problem so she ensured that she moved fast and efficient so the end result wasn't so bad after all. She helped him take the shirt off and brought some fresh clothes before leaving him alone in the bathroom.

He didn't check himself in the mirror. There was no point. The mullet wasn't there anymore, the last thing that had connected him to his mom was dead as well. There was no point in mourning. He washed painfully slow. But it was important to do this for himself, it was important to manage on his own.

It was unbelievably difficult to accept the fact that during the same weekend, he had managed to kiss the boy that he liked and be liked back, have these two wonderful people offer him not only a room of his own, but true genuine affection – which Billy hadn't had in a long time – and at the same time, have his father alter him in such a way that all that rage seemed useless now.

When Billy came back to the living room, Tamara helped put on a clean t-shirt.

"Is Max coming later?" Billy asked as he noticed that the darkness had fallen over Hawkins, quietly pushing against the windows like an uninvited guest.

"Yes, your friend Steve is driving her here," Tamara answered as she offered him a glass of water and another set of pills. Billy grimaced but swallowed them and leaned back against the couch, although it was impossible to find a comfortable enough position for his cracked ribs. The TV was on, a commercial for Coca-Cola playing at the moment. Benny sat in an armchair that looked so sturdy, Sheriff Hopper might have joined him too. The amusing thought made him smile softly (he was a riot, at least in his own goddamn mind). Tamara came back from the kitchen with another glass of fresh water, which she set in front of Billy and a can of beer for herself as she settled into Benny's arms.

Billy must have succumbed to the lulling blue light of the TV, the soft glow of the lamp in the corner not strong enough to keep him awake. So when he blinked blearily again, drowsy and slightly thirsty, he could hear murmurs in the kitchen, a childish soft laughter piercing through his sluggish brain. He leaned forward slightly but it felt like his whole chest was on fire and moaned faintly before leaning back.

"Let me," came the gentle whisper and Billy took a deep breath as he turned to his side and stared back into Steve Harrington's wide brown eyes, his delicious lips slightly parted, but somehow still crumpled in unhappiness. He took the glass of water and offered it to Billy, who took it and drank small sips trying to make his brain function again.

"What are you doing here, pretty boy?" Billy asked at last and held tightly the glass, remarkably grounding in the soft light.

"Dropped Max," Harrington tossed back casually and if Billy thought that he could pick up a fight with the boy, he was sadly mistaken. "She's in the kitchen, enjoying her lasagne. Do you want me to call her?"

"Not yet," Billy spoke softly. Steve smiled gently at him. This boy made of sunshine and kindness, *his boy*, and what the fuck Steve was doing with a boy like him, Billy simply couldn't comprehend. Steve glanced back towards the kitchen then cupped Billy's cheek, trailing

his thumb over Billy's cheekbone. The gentleness in his gesture was in heavy contrast with the deep furrow of his eyebrows so Billy pressed tenderly against it with his good hand.

“Cheer up, pretty boy, I'll be good as new soon enough,” Billy muttered and then took Steve's hand away, squeezed it once and let it go. Harrington picked up cues better than anyone. There was so much to learn for Steve – gestures that he'd have to hide or better control, tender glances that had nothing to do with common male friendship, the unbearable distance between them that would never get closer until they'd have their own space. Billy pinched his nose. The fuck was the matter with him? Already thinking of a future with Harrington. And it seemed that Steve could read his thoughts for his mouth crumpled in unhappiness again and he tilted his head down to look at his hands as if he didn't know where to put them.

His goddamn eyes. Bambi-like-eyes. Fuck this!

“Billy-”

“So because of this,” and he wriggled the fingers from his dislocated arm, “I might need someone to pick me up and drive me to school. Drive me around when I need it. Do you know where I might find such a person?”

“Well, it wouldn't be very difficult to find someone interested in this position,” Steve replied, “though it depends whether you'd be able to cope with the lack of Metallica during the rides.”

“We could always listen to the mixtape I gave you.” Billy was a good negotiator, but an even better preventer of crises. He really wanted to fucking avoid discussing what had happened to him the previous night.

“Really? Play The Ramones song on loop?” Steve smirked and yeah, Billy's ass was so owned it wasn't even funny. Even more obnoxiously, with a side-glanced to the kitchen door to ensure their privacy, Steve gently ran his fingers through Billy's hair and sang in tender whispers, changing a bit the lyrics. “Hey, little boy, I wanna be your boyfriend/ Sweet little boy, I wanna be your boyfriend.” He shook his head deprecatingly. “That actually sounded much creepier

out loud than in my mind. Not such a good idea.”

“Harrington, I'd fucking kiss you right now if I could,” Billy harshly muttered as he blushed slightly. His boy smiled faintly before looking down and away, the mood changing again.

“You should have called me,” Steve said, bottom lip quivering slightly. “I would have come straight away, you know?”

“I don't want to talk about it.” His curt reply made Harrington – *Steve* – flinch, but Billy couldn't help himself.

“You don't want to talk about it?” The disbelief in Steve's voice was already grating on Billy's nerves. “You don't want to talk about the fact that your fucking piece of shit of a father almost killed you? And that you didn't even file a complaint against him?”

“It's not your fucking business,” he snarled and this time Steve's eyes narrowed down, chin jutting out stubbornly.

“Is this how things are going to be from now on?” Harrington hissed and it was spine-chilling the way he could unnerve Billy. “You're standing here with cracked ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and short hair and have the guts to tell me that you're not talking about it and you just need a fucking ride to school?”

“Yes, that's exactly fucking right! I should have called so you could do fucking what?” The words now tumbled out of his mouth like spiky thistles. “Come with the bat by my house and save me like the big knight in shiny armor that you are? What good would it do to stand here and complain about what my father did to me? It's not the fucking first time and it sure as hell won't be the last time. It's not even the fucking worst time. So when I say I don't want to talk about it, I really fucking don't!” He took a sip of his water before adding the final blow, “And if it's too much of an inconvenience to drive me around, then so fucking-”

“Finish that fucking sentence and I will fucking punch you in your fucking stubborn face, Hargrove!” Steve snarled, teeth bared and face flushed in patchy red blotches. “Unless you want me to leave. Is that it?” Billy gulped for air as Steve seemed to prepare himself to do just

so. "Is this what you want? Because I may not be the brightest crayon in the box, but even I can get the hint that just because we spent a few times together and fooled around, it doesn't necessarily mean anything."

To Billy's alarm, Steve stood up and adjusted his soft-looking red jumper. His hand sprung like a snake and tightened against that slim wrist in a second. He squeezed at it like a lifeline as Steve stared down at him until finally, finally, sat down again. Billy couldn't hear past the rush of blood to his ears, but he checked the door anyway and, making sure that no one was coming, he pressed himself slightly into Steve's space, still holding on to his wrist. And Steve just waited patiently for Billy to find his words. It was so goddamn difficult when all he wanted was to close his eyes and never think again.

"I don't want you to leave," Billy muttered at last, still not looking at Steve.

"Then I won't," came the quiet reply, and Billy closed his eyes in sweet surrender.

"That easy?"

"Yes, that easy." Steve pressed his cheek against his forehead. "I might be new at this, but I'm not new to monsters, Billy. I told you that. So your monster won't scare me away." Steve ran his fingers through his hair and kissed gently the top of his head. "You look handsome like this," he whispered almost too low for Billy to hear. "You look beautiful to me, Billy, can I say this to a guy?" Billy could feel Steve shrugging a little as he scrunched his eyes even tighter. "I actually don't care. I'll say it to you. It looks like a crown of curls sits on your head now and you can barely see the stitches." Steve leaned forward a little more, his lips now touching the shell of Billy's right ear. "*My king.*"

Billy's gasped echoed only in the small space between the two of them as he tightened his hold on Steve's wrist. Although the other boy didn't seem to care as he wrapped his other arm around Billy's shoulders, *oh so carefully so gently*, and pulled him closer into a tight embrace. He hid his face into Steve's neck and inhaled sharply, the want rolling through his veins like luscious syrup.

"I'm gonna let you go now," Steve gently mumbled, barely breathing. "Not because I want to, but because someone might come in."

"Yeah, okay."

Billy opened his eyes and peered at Steve through his long lashes. Later on, in that new bed of his, he'd think that not one boy had ever watched him with such open desire, how Billy had wanted to drown in it and never come back to the surface again.

Steve plastered himself on Billy's right side and this was how Max and Benny found them when they finally joined them in the living-room. Max briefly moaned about Steve not telling her that Billy had woken up but other than that, she mostly stayed on Billy's other side not talking much. Tamara grabbed a seat in the huge armchair and Benny settled at her feet and they all watched TV in silence. They talked about music and TV shows and the planned movie releases for that year and somewhere in between debating the merits of Han Solo versus Indiana Jones, Billy fell asleep, Steve's heat on his right side a companion even in his dreams.

~O~

Sunday morning loomed gloomily over them like a dense fog that wouldn't go away. The clouds had fallen over Hawkins like a thick grey comforter leaving little room to breathe. Billy slept well for most of the night but towards morning, he had woken up trembling, a silent scream still lodged in his throat. Unable to shake the horror of the nightmare, he looked around the room trying to take comfort in the new surroundings, even if there wasn't much, to begin with. By the time Benny came to wake him up, Billy was staring out of the window, all washed and ready to go.

Tamara made him breakfast and watched him carefully when he took his meds. The putrid scent of worry had wrapped around her like a terrible shroud and Billy didn't know what to do with himself. He hated to see the weariness in other people, not only directed at him but also directed at his circumstances. He hated the fact that he could bring no relief to it for there wasn't any. Benny sported a deep frown the size of the Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean and he looked even scarier than yesterday morning.

"Maybe I should call Harrington to drive me home," Billy suggested in a small voice, although he'd rather have walked all the way back to his house than subject Steve to being even in the slightest vicinity of his home at the moment.

"No, I'll drive you. That was the deal with your father." Benny's admission dug out something ugly to the surface inside of Billy. If his father had been in a position to make demands, then, by now, Neil Hargrove must have realized that Billy hadn't said anything at the hospital. Fuck, but living in such terror all the time was increasingly fucking him up and he didn't know how much longer he would resist.

The drive home was silent and tensed. Benny drove white-knuckled, shoulders tensed, his lips pressed into a thin line. Billy watched the houses appear and reappear again and again – Hawkins was really an ugly little town when the weather was so gloomy.

"If he touches you again, I'll fucking kill him," Benny hissed suddenly, his words reverberated in an awful way.

"This is actually what I'm trying to prevent, big guy, but thanks for the thought."

"I'm not joking."

"Me neither." Billy squirmed in his seat as he tried to find a different position. He was comfortable because he was still wearing Benny's hoodie and t-shirt, looking most likely like a drowned rat but the faint sense of safety was precious.

"If you think he'll try something again, you come to me. I already spoke with Hop about it – we're trying to figure something out – but in the meantime, it's really important that you keep safe."

"I'm trying, but it's not like my father gives me warnings," Billy snapped back but that was only half of a truth. In reality, he should have fucking seen it coming because his father had pressed the problem of the hair over and over again. He had warned Billy that he was going to take the matter into his own fucking hands but did Billy fucking listen? No, because he was too fucking busy thinking about Steve and school and getting the fuck out of Hawkins but also trying

to find a way to protect Max. He had been so torn about it that little else occupied his mind. He should have known better.

His father was going to kill him at some point. There was no point denying it. Maybe Neil wouldn't want to and he'd think that it would be just another lesson that he just had to teach Billy, but things could get out of hand so painfully easy – like this last incident proved it – and Billy would be left to deal with the brunt of the consequences. And neither Benny nor Hopper would be able to do something about it. Billy was goddamn certain of that at least.

"Just stay out of it, Hammond," Billy said at last when he saw the unhappy hunch of his shoulders. "I'll be just fine."

"Yeah, somehow that actually doesn't make me feel better."

"It shouldn't." Billy rolled his eyes. "But I'm out of ideas."

Benny glanced at him then returned his attention to the road. They didn't speak for the rest of the ride but there was still something that gnawed at Benny for he seemed restless and he squirmed several times in his chair before he started to drum his fingers over the steering wheel. Not that it was Billy's business anyway for he didn't feel capable of offering the slightest comfort to anyone else.

When they got in front of the Hargrove house, Benny stopped the car and didn't look at Billy.

"You have the medication with you?"

"Yeah." Billy watched the house with the weariness of a prisoner receiving the death sentence.

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow at work then."

Billy stared back in disbelief. "What the hell could I possibly do at work with my dislocated shoulder?"

"I'll figure something out. Make Harrington drop you at the usual time."

"Yes, dad." Billy opened the door and took his brown bag of

medication before slowly getting off. "Thanks, Benny," he said as he watched his house, back turned, unable to look at his boss. Friend? Older brother? "Thank you for everything."

"You have nothing to thank me for, kid. I'll see you tomorrow." His gruff voice was painful to listen to, yet Billy just nodded and didn't look back.

Benny didn't wait for him to get inside the house. He revved the engine and was out of there in no time. Billy understood. After the man offered him a room in his own goddamn house, it must have been incredibly difficult to deliver Billy back to his abusive father.

A cold shiver trickled down his spine and it had nothing to do with the chilly air outside. As he turned the handle of the door, his hands shaky and clammy, he took a deep breath before making it inside. His father was watching TV in the living room, dressed in a nice polo and a pair of clean jeans, a cup of coffee on the small table next to his armchair. Billy's hair stood on the back of his neck, throat painfully tight.

"Good morning, sir," Billy managed to mutter at last, after swallowing hard a few times. His father turned gradually towards him like a snake prepared for the attack, his eyes shrewd and calculating.

"Good morning, Billy." He pressed each word tight and vicious. Billy's bruised chest was caught in a gripping vice. "I hope you knew what to say at the hospital and you haven't caused me any trouble."

"Yes, sir." Billy swallowed several times, pinned down by his father's cold eyes.

Neil pointed slowly at Billy's hair, "And you finally look like a real man."

"Yes, sir." Neil's eyebrows arched demandingly and Billy felt sick, sick, sick with the terrible need to just get out of that house now and never look back. "Thank you, sir," he mumbled mostly into his chest because he couldn't look at his father anymore.

"You're welcome. Now go and clean your room," Neil said as an after-

thought and returned his attention to the TV. "Your sister wanted to do it for you, but I said you'd like to do it instead since it's your responsibility."

"Yes, sir." Billy trudged towards his bedroom. He could hear Susan pattering around the kitchen but he didn't care about her. Apparently, she didn't care about him either since she didn't even bother to come out and ask about how he felt. Like a spineless ostrich hiding away – how long did she think she could carry on like this until it came to bite her in the fucking ass? Billy didn't know and didn't fucking care.

He was suddenly hit by a wave of intense hatred towards his father. He opened the door of his room and softly closed it behind him. He leaned against the door and stared at his bed. There were hair and blood everywhere – it looked fucking gruesome. The walls pressed against him suddenly and his vision darkened around the edges.

I'll make a real man out of you, boy. I promise you that.

Billy gasped for air though he seemed to sink further and further down into a dark abyss where no one could get him. He hated Neil Hargrove with the power of a thousand suns, he hoped that he'd burn in hell one day. And maybe Billy would burn alongside with him, but he still deeply desired to smell that tar over his father's skin. Neil Hargrove was a piece of shit who deserved no less.

A soft knock on the door. A gentle whisper, "Billy, can I come in?"

It took a lot out of him to actually answer Max and even more, to get out of the way. He marginally stepped aside, leaning against the wall and as soon as Max came in, she closed the door behind her, eyes hard and mouth twisted bitterly. She was holding a broom in one hand and a black garbage bag.

"I figured the asshole would be too busy with his goddamn game so I thought I'd come and gave you a hand," she whispered as she took him in. "If you want, you can go to my room and I can clean up here."

"Thank you, Max," Billy's voice seemed to float away from him and

she got closer to him. Max put a gentle hand on his chest and looked soulfully at him. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Crash and burn." She grinned wildly because, at times, there was only humor saving them both from the insanity of the whole situation. "Now," she patted him a few more times before stepping away, "I'm going to take everything that's on the bed and throw it away and you can sit on the desk chair and help when I ask you to."

"Yes, ma'am."

As she took the sheets off and pushed them in the black bag, as she swiped his hair and threw it too, Max kept up a constant stream of silly stories about her pack of nerds and her misadventures with the skateboard that he had bought for her. She aired the room and even put new sheets on the bed, she fluffed the pillow and wiped the dust. And all this time, she didn't let Billy do anything – he listened to her without actually listening to her, her soothing voice washing over him and calming down his abused heart.

When she finished, she made him take everything to the trash to seem like he had done it all. Susan didn't even raise her eyes as he stepped into the kitchen and then out on the side door. When he came back in, he caught Max staring down her mom with such disgust that Billy shuddered.

"Here, Billy," she said a little louder, mostly for her mom, "have a fresh glass of water for your medication. Or do you want orange juice?"

"Orange juice sounds better actually, thank you," he replied and winced when he watched her stomp to the fridge, still mad as hell. God, his sister was probably the best person to ever walk this fucking earth and the fact that they didn't share her last name was a blessing in disguise. She slammed the door of the fridge, making her mother wince, but Susan still wouldn't look at him.

They went back to their respective rooms. Billy took his pills and washed them with a bit of juice before laying down on the bed without even changing. He stared at the ceiling, his mind carefully blank.

Just two more months and he'd be out of here.

~O~

Billy needed to stop expecting things to happen.

Especially things he particularly wanted them to happen.

Or maybe this was a good thing, but it sure as hell didn't feel that way.

Because people caring about him? Pissed the shit out of him.

Nowadays, Benny looked as if he had swallowed a thunderstorm that was about to explode soon over them. And every single goddamn annoying day brought another question of whether Neil did or said something. While he understood where Benny was coming from, it didn't mean it didn't bother the hell out of Billy. He was used to taking care of himself and when suddenly someone started to pay attention to him? Well, it sure as hell didn't sit well with him. It suffocated him to the point that he barely spoke with Hammond anymore.

Had it been just Hammond, maybe it wouldn't have irked Billy so much. But it wasn't just him. At home, Max didn't leave him alone with his father at all. In fact, she didn't leave him alone period. She would sit on the floor and go through his cassettes and ramble on about one band or another, usually along the lines of *yack, Billy, I have no idea how you could listen to this shit*, then promptly go to bed once her mom would advise her that it was time. No arcade, no secret party meetings (yeah, they really called it like that and she really needed to do something with the volume of the station). She would glower at Neil and scowl at Susan and basically just be a constant pain in the ass.

Astonishingly enough, it was actually his father that acted the right way by completely ignoring Billy's existence, which suited him just fine. Except for a terrifying moment towards the end of the week, Neil was good at greeting Billy and throwing the occasional instruction while at the same time doing a good impression of Billy non-existing. The only time Neil Hargrove paid attention to Billy had

been one evening when he managed to corner him in the kitchen and stare him down conniving.

"Who's the boy that's been dropping you and Max to school?"

"The team's captain," Billy gritted through his clenched teeth, horrified to notice that he had started to tremble.

"What's his business dropping you around?"

"None, sir. He's just doing me a favor."

"Well, I hope for your sake that's all he does."

"He has a girlfriend, sir, and her brother is friends with Max." This time his annoyance surged and his father's eyes narrowed. It was as if being stared down by a dreadful monster that had nothing better to think about Billy than how to inflict pain and misery.

"Very well, I'll allow it. But I'd watch my language if I were you, boy."

"Yes, sir."

His father watched him a little longer. Billy's heart hammered in his chest, mouth dry and shoulders tense. A cold shiver ran down his spine and stomach bottomed up. He could feel himself sweating. For a wild and terrifying moment, he could actually picture himself blabbering to his father the truth and seal the deal for both himself and Steve. Universes must have crumbled in that infinitesimal moment, but, in the end, Neil just stepped aside and tilted his head just so for Billy to comprehend he was fucking done. Billy literally scurried back to his room but didn't feel sorry at all. He'd do anything to protect Steve. *Anything*.

And Steve, *Steve* with his beautiful doe eyes and with his long fingers. While he didn't actively ask any questions about what had happened that night, his curiosity was almost palpable. And what was worse about his curiosity was not the need to know just because he wanted to know, but the need to know so that he'd help Billy. Seriously, like he could do fucking anything about it. But bless him, did he try. At times, Steve Harrington seemed made of gentle gestures, small caresses here and there, tiny smiles pressed between full lips and

heated kisses stolen in the back seat, when after a long day, Billy would let Steve press him against the door and kiss and kiss and kiss.

And Billy appreciated all of this, he really did, but all these people had been grating on Billy's nerves. It was baffling as to why they insisted on their care when it was stupid anyway. They should have all accepted the fact that the only person that could do something was fucking Neil Hargrove and he wasn't going to stop anytime soon.

In fact, his patience had run so thin that by the time Saturday had rolled in, Billy was at the sheriff's desk – having driven by himself and having told Benny where he had gone – a hot cup of coffee front of him and a muffin in his right hand, courtesy of Mrs. Flo, who apparently also loved to shove apples instead of doughnuts into the chief's hand. Briefly, Billy had smirked triumphantly – he wasn't the only one to be so whipped by an older woman. Hopper had scowled at the apple in his hand but still took a bite as he sat down at his desk.

"You need to make them stop," Billy said, munching on his muffin as he bravely ignored the painful cramp in his left shoulder. It had been way too early for him to try driving but at least for today, he really hadn't wanted to have Harrington show his Bambi eyes as Billy was complaining to the good old sheriff.

"Make who stop what?" Hopper leaned back and glanced over quickly to see where Flo was before he opened the drawer and snatched a chocolate-glazed doughnut.

"Well, Hammond and Max and fucking Harrington. They're killing me with all this hovering and I might snap, Hopper. Don't think that I won't." Billy gulped half of his coffee, then took another bite of his blueberry muffin and scowled at Hopper while keeping an eye on Flo – Billy really wanted to see Hopper fucking scolded.

"What do you want me to do, kid?" Hopper took another generous bite out of his doughnut, a bit of chocolate gaze sticking on the corner of his mouth. Just out of spite, Billy didn't say anything.

"I don't know, whatever you deem necessary."

"Look, kid, you do know they have serious reasons for concern, yeah?" Hopper talked with his mouth half-full. Disgusting indeed. "Your father almost stabs you and dislocates your shoulder – for a second time if you don't mind me saying – and still you won't say the truth about it and you won't talk with anyone about it."

"I spoke with Benny. Also, not all of us are into the *sharing is caring* crap," Billy tossed back and took another sip of his coffee, then narrowed his eyes at Hopper. "You seem like the only sane person left around me so I came to you. Make them stop."

"Why do you think I am the only sane person?" Hopper looked slightly baffled like an oversized squirrel with too much to eat on its hands. "Just because I don't insist on you filing a complaint against your father, it doesn't mean I might not be plotting."

"Plotting? What the fuck?" Billy stood a little straighter in his seat. "Look, y'all need to back the fuck off. I have two more months and then I turn eighteen and then I'm done. Until then, y'all better leave me the fuck alone."

"Look, kid," Hopper said as he licked his fingers and then leaned forward a little, intertwining his fingers on the desk, "as from one fucked up son to another, I understand. I understand about abusive assholes like your father a lot more than you might think. It doesn't help that the law isn't much of anything at the moment regarding that and it doesn't help that all your close ones found out the truth about what your father had been doing to you." Hopper raised a hand when Billy wanted to interrupt him. "Let me finish! I'll speak with Benny if that's what you want and maybe if you could speak with Max and Harrington – respectfully and calmly – then I think they'd listen to you and back off. Not that they would stop worrying completely."

"Look, I know, it's just so fucking hard accepting this."

"What? People hovering over you? Worrying about you?"

"Caring about me," he crushed the words between his teeth as if hoping that Hopper might not hear them.

“Yeah, I know.” Hopper watched him in sympathy. “It's suffocating at times and it makes you feel like they should mind their own fucking business.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But hear me out: if you ever want to file a complaint against your dad, I have the photos, I have the medical reports – just let me know and we'll figure shit out.”

“Look, for me, it's kind of too little, too fucking late,” Billy said and looked down and away. “I've got two more months and then I can move away from that fucking asshole. But what I don't want is for Max to fall into my place.”

“That will never happen.” Hopper's icy voice made Billy shudder and stare up at him again. Billy could suddenly see the real cop behind the happy-go-fucking-lucky that the sheriff seemed to have embodied up to a point. “Leave your father up to me. I'll take care of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You'll see.” Hopper leaned back and crossed his arms over the back of his head. “Now should I call Benny to come and pick you up or will you? Because you sure as hell aren't going to drive with a dislocated shoulder again under my watch.”

“I'll call Benny as long as Harrington doesn't get to fucking hear about this.”

“Harrington?” Hopper grinned like a shark. “You friends now?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” And to his horror, Billy could feel himself slightly blush.

“Interesting.”

“There's nothing interesting about it.”

“If you say so.” Billy flipped him off but then turned the phone towards him and called the garage.

Five minutes later, Benny was ripping him a new one but he didn't care. Actually, Billy was grinning savagely because Flo was ripping a new one to Hooper, having seen the chocolate-glaze on his face, and it was a glorious thing to witness.

~O~

The advantage of being driven around by Steve Harrington?

Being in Steve's presence and having conversations with him, seeing what made him tick and what made him laugh, and what annoyed him too. Everything about him fascinated Billy, especially because all the information seemed to be offered with such an ease that made Billy envious of him.

The disadvantage of being driven around by Steve Harrington?

Dustin fucking Henderson and his fucking pack of rugrats. Also, seriously, if he met another fucking person whose name started with an H in this fucking God-forsaken little town, he was going to fuck things up.

Because while the Wheeler kid and the Byers kid were dropped most of the times to their respective houses or the arcade by their fucking respective siblings, not the same happened to Dustin fucking Henderson.

On Monday morning, when Steve came and picked him and Max up for the first time, Dustin Henderson was already sitting in the back of the Beemer with his arms crossed in front of him and an attitude a mile high. His cap did little to hide his fucking curls, much more pronounced than Billy's – Billy painfully admitted this later on, with a healthy dose of recalcitrance, because he was the bigger man in this picture and fuck whatever Steve said.

“Just for the record,” the boy said as soon as Billy slammed the door after him and Steve started the engine of the car, “I am totally against this! Just because you apologized to a few of us – and no, you still haven't apologized to me or to Mike – I still think you're a psychopath and you shouldn't be around our precious Steve.”

“Since when the fuck am I called *precious*?” Steve scowled in the rearview mirror at the boy in the back seat, while Max and Billy tried and failed to hide their respective snickers.

“Relax, Steve, I got your back and this psychopath is not going to touch you.”

“That's Mr. Psychopath to you, kid.” Billy bared his teeth to the little man, enough to make him press back into the seat.

Then Billy just had to leer in Steve's direction, making him blush because, well, it had been a too beautiful moment to miss. Although, Steve didn't appreciate any of it as he rolled his pretty eyes at the both of them, before sighing deeply and driving them to school.

Billy thought that this would be the last time Henderson would speak with him as he had already made his point of protecting Steve from Billy. And in the deep recess of the night when he was too fucking scared to sleep for fear that his dad might come after him and touch him again in that brutal way, Billy agreed with Henderson – Steve was too fucking good for him, the way he never seemed to be afraid of the brash persona Billy had constantly displayed, and the way he'd not taken any shit from him too. Nonetheless, that didn't mean he liked hearing this over and over again, especially from Henderson who made a point of antagonizing him every step of the way.

Case in point:

“How the hell do you consider *Pet Semetary* better than *Cycle of the Werewolf*, man?” Henderson's lisp was all the more pronounced when he got annoyed, and usually, that happened when he spoke with Billy, who was turned halfway in his seat and was looking at Henderson getting more and more worked up. “Marty Coslaw is the man! He's paraplegic and tons of people give him attitude and he still manages to realize that the reverend is the werewolf and kill him on New Year's Eve, no less! How is a story about a fucking useless man who keeps burying people in a place where he shouldn't bury them in the first place is better than a story about a hero kid?”

“I like it more because it's creepier,” Billy said and pinched his nose. “I don't fucking understand why we have to agree on all of King's

novels and why I am not entitled to like the ones that I do.”

“Because you think *Salem's Lot* is better than Stoker's *Dracula*.” Henderson threw his hands up. “You literally just lost a thousand cool points right there, pal.”

“Again, we'll talk about this when you are around my age and your brain tries to crawl out of boredom in English class when the teacher has no fucking clue what she's fucking talking about.” Billy threw a glance at Steve, who was trying to resume his driving without further incidents. “Seriously, how did you manage to be friends with this guy? Can you believe this shit?”

“What about the Bachman's novels?” Will muttered from his corner of the back seat, startling Billy. He had almost forgotten that Will Byers was in the car with them that morning. Apparently, Byers had an important photo project at school and had to leave earlier that morning. And apparently, Wheeler couldn't be bothered to take her boyfriend's little brother to school either. Why was it always fucking Steve in charge of that?

“What about them?” Dustin asked when it was clear that Billy wouldn't say anything.

“I've read that some people think that Richard Bachman is one of Stephen King's aliases,” Will stammered when he noticed that everyone in the car suddenly paid attention to him. “I only read *The Gunslinger* but I liked it a lot. I think I drew some comics based on a few of the scenes a while back.” Will shrugged embarrassedly when Dustin watched him, mouth wide opened.

“Yeah, I heard those rumors too,” Billy said softly. There was a sort of hesitance in the way Will talked that reminded him of his own way when his father first started to hit him. Steve also mentioned about Mr. Byers being a fucking dickhead that had been thrown out of town by Sheriff Hopper. “I love *The Gunslinger*. The guy's a real badass.” Will smiled hesitantly at him as Henderson now turned his awed attention to Billy. “I'd love to see the comics, Zombie Boy. I heard you're pretty good at drawing.”

“Yeah.” Will blushed heavily and looked away, an amused smile on

his lips. "I can try and find them."

"How come I've never known about this Bachman guy?" Henderson's indignation was honestly too fucking funny.

"Because you talk too fucking much and you love only King's lame novels."

"Billy, be nice!" Steve intervened as Max chuckled at him.

"I am nice. It's not my fault your children lack good taste in literature. Or you for that matter, Mr. I-have-no-clue-who-the-fuck-Stephen-King-is."

"Yeah, let's not talk about that day that will go down into history books as an infamous day." Henderson nodded in agreement and even pretended to wipe a tear away. "At least Mr. Psychopath here has good taste in writers, Steve. You didn't even know who King was."

"Oh, I'm sorry that I didn't know about this creepy guy living in Maine and writing creepy novels." Steve parked in front of the middle school and scowled at Henderson. "May I remind you that not all of us have the same taste in books and movies?"

"Oh, I'll forgive you when someone else besides you has heard about Ursula K. Le Guin." Henderson sighed and looked at Steve as if he was a mere simpleton, but Harrington made a complicated dismissive gesture.

"I like Le Guin but also Philip K. Dick and H. G. Wells," Steve replied, "and you don't hear me complaining about the fact that you have no clue who those are."

"I like Dick too." Billy leered at Harrington, who blushed this time a little harder.

"Of course you do." Henderson rolled his eyes at the both of them, as clueless as the day he was born. Billy snickered.

"Well, you – as a big fan of Harrison Ford – should know better than anyone that *Blade Runner* was based on one of Dick's novels," Billy

schooled the little shit because honestly, he just loved to have the upper hand.

"You're lying." Henderson narrowed his eyes and it was kind of amusing to see him so worked up again.

"Nope, he's right," Steve intervened. "The movie was loosely based on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which is one of his best-known novels."

"Oh my God, really, you guys!" Max exclaimed and pushed in Billy's chair. "I want to get out of this car because if I have to listen to you one more minute trying to out-geek yourselves, I'm going to throw up."

"I'm not a geek," Billy snarled but it had absolutely no impact on his sister.

"We have been debating the merits of King's novels for the past few days, we spent a whole ride to the arcade debating whether *Dracula* was goddamn pointless in terms of literary importance or not," Max exposed her case as if in the court, waiting to be lawyer, judge, and jury at the same time. "In fact, I remember you distinctly had to explain to us what's so goddamn interesting about Vonnegut or Killer-bot, or whatever his name was. I feel like I've been living in a constant English class since this maniac," and she threw her index finger in Henderson's face, "opened the discussion in the first place. So let's all agree you're a goddamn geek and let's move on."

"But I like it," Will said from his corner, and Max huffed exasperatedly.

"Yeah, me too, Max," Henderson added his two cents into the conversation. "Apart from Will, no one reads King's novels. Do you know how difficult it is to find someone to talk about them with?"

"Oh, My God! I am done!" Max huffed again, throwing her arms down in defeat. She opened the door of the car and looked at all of them slightly disappointed, then shook her head and got out. She leaned back and hissed, "I need to speak with someone sane or I'll explode. So long, losers!" She slammed the door of the car, and Billy

turned slightly annoyed at Steve.

“Did my sister just call me a loser?”

“I think she did, pal.” Henderson patted him on the shoulder in commiseration, then pulled the Byers kid after him. “Come on, Will, let’s see if Lucas and Mike have already arrived.”

“I hate you so much,” Billy hissed as they made their way towards Hawkins High, glaring as much as he could at Steve, who simply chuckled and waved a dismissive gesture.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve said and grinned widely as he parked the car in his usual spot.

“I was cool before I met you, Harrington,” Billy snapped but there was no bite to his words. Or maybe there was. But only a little. “Now I’m debating symbols in King’s novels with a thirteen-year-old while another promises me drawings based on *The Gunslinger*. Not only that,” he slammed the Beemer’s door to make a point – which apparently he was failing at because Steve just continued smirking at him, “but now I’m trying to shape their ignorant minds and convince them to read Vonnegut.”

“Which, by the way, I feel like is way too mature for them and maybe they should start easier.”

“Fuck this! We sound like two fucking geeks, Harrington!” He pushed his fingers through his hair. “I’ve never been a fucking geek and I’m not going to start now.”

“Again, I fail to see how is this my fault since you seem so keen on discussing all of this with Dustin,” Steve said and followed him to the locker. “In fact, I specifically remember telling you not to get him started but you thought better and now here we are, dipshit.”

A freshman scurried away as soon as he heard Steve. Apparently, because of their brash attitudes plus the fact that Billy was even scarier now with short hair, people tended to give them a wide berth lately. So much space in fact that he started to hang out with Byers and Wheeler during lunch. So much space that a lot of the literary

discussions that he had with Wheeler had been transferred to Henderson and company.

Billy was never going to fucking recover after this.

~O~

The Four Horsemen pounding in his ears, Max scowling constantly at him – *I'm going back with Steve, asshole* – and the engine of the Camaro purring around him, plus a feeble February sun that was trying its best to warm things up. What was better than this fucking feeling of freedom? He grinned at Max, who rolled her eyes but couldn't hide her smile when he pretended to look away. He dropped her to school and after the familiar see you later, asshole, he drove to his usual parking spot and even smoked a cigarette leaning back against the Camaro.

Billy's good mood of driving to school by himself dispelled though as soon as he got inside the building, opened the locker and a few cards fell down. A snicker promptly let him know that Steve had witnessed the entire scene. That didn't stop Billy from leaning forwards and picking them with his thumb and index finger as if they were radioactive material. Hearts and red ribbons, teddy-bears and red flowers painted on them.

"The fuck's this?" He growled looking up at Harrington and waved the goddamn cards as if they were poisonous.

"Valentine cards," Steve snorted as he leaned against the nearest locker. "Which proves once again that in spite of being the high school asshole, girls will always go for the bad boy aura."

"Careful, Harrington, you sound bitter there."

"You wish."

"Yeah? So how many did you get then, pretty boy?"

"Not that many," Steve mumbled, blushing prettily. Billy highly doubted that. He fucking hated Valentine's Day and he would still have showered Steve in cards if he could have done it. He really doubted that King Steve wouldn't have his fellow subjects show their

appreciation. Something really unpleasant lodged in his mouth – it tasted a lot like jealousy.

“Right.” Billy threw the cards back into his locker with a mild look of disgust, then shoved his winter coat too. “Fucking Valentine's Day, man! Fucking hell!”

“I guess you're not much of a fan?”

Billy could hear the wistfulness in Steve's voice immediately but pretended to be absorbed by looking for his trigonometry notes. Of course, Steve was a fan of the celebration and Billy hated himself immediately because his first thought was that last year most likely Steve Harrington was the crowned king of Hawkins High and Wheeler was his fucking beautiful queen and they had ruled over the high school, probably receiving tons of admiration and cards and roses. Face set tight, he took the notes out and slammed the door of his locker.

“Oh, Harrington, you don't want to get me started on this fucking cringe-worthy disaster of a fucking celebration, built on the stupid presumption people need to spend just one day a year making their loved ones know that they're loved. As if during the rest of the year, I can't treat them right or show my love or make big gestures. Because it won't matter! It's not fucking Valentine's Day!” The second bell interrupted his speech and Steve smiled at him but it was faint and twisted, more of a grimace than anything else.

“I'll see you at lunch, Romeo,” Steve said and before Billy could say anything else, he made his way down the corridor. Halfway down through it, a freshman stopped him and gave him a card. He smiled lightly and probably thanked her because the girl blushed heavily and looked completely smitten. It was probably the hundredth card of the day. Billy punched the locker once and turned the opposite direction.

That nagging feeling of not being worthy of Steve Harrington accompanied him like a familiar ghost throughout the whole morning. He had fisted his hands and had watched them most of his math class. It was so fucking stupid to hate a holiday like this one but he couldn't help himself. The only time Valentine's Day was

celebrated at the Hargrove house back in California was when Billy was about seven. He could remember even now how he had come from school and watched his mom in her white apron with little red hearts cooking for Neil his favorite dish – meatballs and spaghetti – and his favorite dessert and she had arranged the kitchen table into a nice little romantic set. Billy had been allowed for once to eat earlier and then stay in his room where he'd be allowed to read all the comics that he wanted. His mum had actually brought him some snacks and even HI-C juice.

And he would have stayed in his room the whole night, had it not been for the sudden sad clank of plates in the sink. He wondered if mum and dad had finished already so he tiptoed outside of his room, down the stairs, across the hallway. He had been almost next to the kitchen's doorway when the sudden icy voice of his father reverberated through the thin walls:

“What's the fucking point of having a romantic diner if you forgot about the beers?” He could have almost seen his father's thin lips, curled in distaste – mum had been silent, he couldn't have heard her and he hadn't wanted to anyway because, even at that age, Billy had been sure that his mum must have been crying. Billy had gone back to his room but his stomach had churned painfully and he hadn't been able to eat anything. He had drunk just a little bit of juice and then had gone to bed. For the first time in his life, Billy had wished that he had had a different father, maybe a kinder, somehow softer man.

It hadn't been the last.

Billy looked away on the window. He was so fucking full of these sad pointless stories that had left tiny invisible scars over time, old battle wounds that never fully healed. At times, he was a wary warrior who had seen too much in life. From the little snippets of the Harrington household, Steve's family wasn't a very happy one either, although mostly because the parents were absent a lot and didn't seem to give a shit about their son. But he was sure that never in their lives was there any complaint about some fucking stupid beer.

Now and then, Billy felt as if he was poisoning Steve's world, shaping and bending it into something twisted and wrong, like he was made

of light and Billy came with his fucking shadow and darkness and ruined everything. But sooner or later, darkness always lost.

Billy would lose. It was bound to happen. Or was he setting himself up for failure? Seriously, it was Benny fucking Hammond's fault for such a thought to even have crossed his mind.

So in a desperate attempt to drown these negative thoughts, at lunch he cornered Steve and pushed him in a storage closet, blocking it so no one would be able to enter or exit. He then switched on the light because -

“I won't fucking fool around with you in the storage room, Hargrove, are you fucking insane?”

- he didn't want to give the wrong impression.

Well, that went well.

“I don't want to fucking fool around, Harrington, don't get your panties in a twist,” he snapped back but still kept his voice quiet. Although the corridor was empty and most of the students and staff were at lunch, he really didn't want to risk it. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“In a storage closet?” Steve could be such a pain in the ass when he wanted to be.

“Yes, let's fucking move on past this not so fucking brilliant idea of mine.” He ran his fingers through his hair, slightly embarrassed. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“About what?” Steve crossed his arms in front of him. The dipshit wasn't even a good actor.

“Listen, moron, just because I fucking despise Valentine's Day, that doesn't mean I wouldn't want to be spending it with you.”

“Oh. *Oh*.”

“Oh indeed, princess!”

"Then why can't you use your fucking words then, Billy?" Steve threw his hands up. "Seriously, we don't need to do any of the bullshit that's being done today. I just want to be with you and hang out." Billy thought about the small present wrapped in brown paper under his bed. Too late for that, he guessed.

"Wanna meet tonight at the quarry then?"

"Nah, it's going to be full of people." Steve took a step forward and wrapped his arms around Billy's shoulders. "Apparently, the quarry becomes truly romantic during the Valentine's Day. What I would suggest would be to come to my place. My parents are gone until next week."

"Again?" Billy frowned even as his hands pressed into Steve's hips, a lucky thumb actually finding a strip of skin.

"You know, that wasn't exactly the answer I was going for." Steve frowned slightly at him.

Billy grinned widely, "Fucking deal, pretty boy."

"So romantic." Steve leaned his forehead against Billy. "Now let's see whether we can still grab some lunch. I'm starving." And he took a step back.

"What? You're fucking kidding me, Harrington." Billy scowled at Steve but he just scowled right back.

"I wasn't joking when I said that I don't want to fool around with you, Hargrove, in a goddamn storage closet no less. We can fool all you want tonight."

"I fucking hate you," he hissed but let him go and Steve took another step back.

"Technically, you don't because you're spending Valentine's Day with me of your own free will, dipshit, so get a move on. I want to eat."

Billy didn't like this one bit and glared at Steve all through the remaining lunch period, but kind of floated for the remaining day. He agreed with Steve to come around seven and then went to collect

Max. Benny had closed the shop for the day because apparently, he had some big plans with Tamara as well so Billy didn't have to come in the afternoon. At the time, Billy hadn't paid much attention to it but now he was wondering whether Benny was going to propose – all people seemed to become really stupid when it came to Valentine's day and proposed. Like any other day wouldn't bring enough significance to the gesture. On the other hand, Lennie had just been grateful for the reprieve. His wife had died a few years back of cancer and he hadn't wanted to have people shove their happiness in his face. He had invited some old friends of his for a few drinks and a game of poker and he had been happy as a clam.

Max was really nervous about what was about to follow. She had received tons of cards – *tons, Billy, tons-* (Billy had been nice and didn't add the fact that half of them were probably from the other little nerds of the school) and Sinclair had written her a short poem, which she refused to read to Billy and that was a fucking shame because he'd have liked to make fun of something. Max spoke excitedly about her plans, which of course involved Sinclair, but also the Wheeler kid and Hopper's adoptive daughter (he really didn't want anything to do with that disaster; also good fucking luck to whoever was chaperoning them – watching Mike Wheeler's bitch face would have been a challenge even for a saint) then she shrewdly asked about his plans.

“Just chilling at the quarry,” he shrugged. The lie didn't sit well with him. “I heard there might be a bash or something. I'll go check it out.”

“With Steve?”

“I don't know whether Harrington might show up.” The tension slipped through his words like a hidden snake. “I'm not his keeper.”

“Right,” she nodded and looked for a moment out on the window. “So then who are you going to see there?”

“Fuck, Max, can we stop talking about this?”

“Why are you so defensive?”

"I don't know what you're fucking talking about." He pressed his lips against the cigarette and took another drag, fingers drumming on the steering wheel.

"Of course you don't." Max looked back at him, her voice turning somewhat gentle, "I don't want you to get hurt." She seemed genuinely worried for him.

"Max, it's just a bash. If I think cops are about to show up, I'll fucking leave."

"It's not about the bash and you know it, dickhead. It's about Steve." She dismissed any reply he might have had with a curt gesture. "Please, Billy don't think that I'm stupid. I saw the way he looked at you that night at Benny's. I saw how careful he was with you for the next few weeks, the way he looks at you all the time now. And the way you look at him. And while it might not be obvious to others, it's obvious to me." Max bit her lip before adding, "I don't want him to hurt you."

"How could he hurt me, Max?" He asked, his throat suddenly dry, losing his will to lie to his sister.

"He only liked girls before." Fuck, her words ripped through Billy and all the giddiness was gone.

"I know," he muttered at last. He took another drag of his cigarette and then threw it out on the window. He rolled the window back up and glanced at Max, "But I can have him for a while longer."

"But will it be enough for you?" He didn't answer to that and she didn't insist. She scowled hard into the distance. "I will use the fucking bat on him if he hurts you," she said as a matter of fact and Billy just had to ruffle her hair.

"My own fucking bodyguard," he quipped, ignoring her outraged squeak. But she let the matter drop and Billy was grateful for small mercies.

He stayed in his room until he was sure that Neil and Susan had left for their romantic dinner at a fancy restaurant or as fancy as Hawkins

could provide. Apparently, they had more plans after that but Billy couldn't fucking care. He simply stayed in his room, refusing even to eat because he didn't want to risk his father getting a look at him and recognizing even the slightest sign of happiness and trying to take it away from him. Max left first as Nancy came and picked her up

He wouldn't let doubt crawl back into his heart. Not tonight anyway, although he would have been a fucking liar to say that Max's words hadn't hurt at all. He took a quick shower after everyone was gone. Deciding to go commando, he pulled on the nicest pair of jeans he had and a white shirt half button up, leaving his medallion out in the open. He styled his curls, the hair in the back looking less and less like it had to catch up. He poured a few drops of cologne around his groin area and took his brown leather jacket on. He grabbed Steve's present and got out of the house like it was on fire.

Steve answered the door with a shy smile that deepened the moment he laid eyes on Billy.

"Hey, come in!" He said and made way for Billy. Inside the house, the lights were lit but the living room had been prepared for the night. On the coffee table lay an array of snacks, a huge pepperoni pizza that must have just arrived because it was still hot and at least two packs of beer and a bottle of champagne that they had drunk at New Year's and Billy had liked it. Hey, there was even a fucking fire in the goddamn fireplace.

"Dim the lights, Harrington, I know you want to," Billy smirked as took his leather jacket off and hid his brown package underneath it. Steve chuckled and turned them off, leaving just two lamps each in corners and the light of the fireplace to make things better for them. For a moment he stood awkwardly in the middle of the living-room, hands to his waist., looking fucking adorable, just saying.

"Yeah, I wanted to, but that doesn't mean you only have to do what I want. I know you don't care much about this in the first place." Steve ran his fingers through his floppy hair. "I want you to feel comfortable too."

"Just leave them like this and come here." Two steps and Steve was in his arms. Billy cupped his cheeks between his hands, thumbs gently

caressing his cheekbones. "You're too fucking nice, Steve."

"You deserve people being nice to you."

"Not much but I appreciate the thought." Billy kissed him slowly and carefully as if he was holding the most precious thing in the world and it wasn't far from the truth either. He tasted those lips as a man would die of starvation but no immediate need behind them. Just this simple act of being together and kissing without being afraid was enough for him.

When they broke apart, Steve smiled. He ran his fingers through Billy's hair and pecked him on the lips. Then made themselves comfortable on the couch, a mere echo of what they had done on New Year's Eve. And maybe there was just as much insecurity between them (at least on Billy's part) but for once they were relaxed and free in touches. They tore into the pizza and drowned it with beer as they watched a movie. They made fun of the characters and they invented lines and Steve was way funnier than he was giving himself credit for.

It was strange how sometimes epiphanies sneaked upon people like silent cats, tiptoeing around the edges until it was too late to fend off their attack. But as he turned his head towards Steve, laughing at a joke he had made, Billy was struck by the sudden understanding that whatever affection he had for Steve – it was too early maybe to call it love but he never fell in love before so how could he possibly know? - it was for the long haul. The mere thought of being here with Steve loose-limbed and soft made Billy understand all those explorers that came to discover new lands. It was glorious, it was wonderful and the responsibility of it alone was extraordinarily dreadful.

"I have something for you," Billy said gently as he made Steve to raise a little so Billy could stand up and pick up the brown package. It was actually a little on the bulky side, wrapped in old brown paper, a bit of thin rope tied around it. Nothing romantic about the way it looked. Billy had to preserve some fucking dignity after all. He went to sit next to Steve who had produced out of nowhere a small blue gift as well.

As soon as he saw it, Billy caught on it immediately, "Did you make

me a mixtape, princess?”

“I sure did. We can't always listen to your goddamn music all the goddamn time,” Steve said, slightly pouting and Billy just had to kiss that pout away. “You can open it first if you want.”

“I'm too fucking curious now anyway.” Billy tore the blue wrapping paper and as soon as he managed to get a glimpse of the songs, he burst out laughing. On the front of it, it just said *For King Billy*, because Steve Harrington was a fucking little shit and no one could contradict Billy on that. And at the back, he read in Steve's familiar scrawl:

Side A

1. *The Ramones – I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend*
2. *The Cure – Boys Don't Cry*
3. *Simon&Garfunkel – Flower Never Bend with the Rainfall*
4. *Heart – Love Alive*
5. *Janis Joplin – Piece of My Heart*

Side B

1. *Sonny&Cher – I Got You Babe*
2. *Alice Cooper – I'm 18*
3. *The Police – King of Pain*
4. *Duran Duran – Save a Prayer*
5. *Billy Idol – Dancing with Myself*

“Okay, I have no issues with most of them, but seriously, fucking The Police?” He could be a little fucker too if he wanted to so he pouted slightly just so Steve could lean in and kiss him breathless.

“Shut up and listen to it when you've got time,” Steve whispered against his lips.

“But why The Ramones song?”

“Yeah, don't pretend you don't understand that one, dipshit.” Steve rolled his eyes and Billy shoved his own present in his chest just because he could.

"Oh, Steve, swearing on this very sacred day?" Billy pretended to wipe a tear away. "I think I can hear the angels crying in Heaven for such a blasphemy."

"Yeah, yeah." Steve looked at the box of chocolates in his one hand and the book in the other. The book was called *The Beginning Place* and it was one of the newest books by Ursula K. Le Guin, which Steve didn't have because Billy had to go through the painful process of asking Wheeler to be sure of it. And that was an experience he didn't care repeating. Ever. Never.

Billy Hargrove had never thought that he might have used the word adorable so much in relation to a boy he was dating, but this Steve Harrington was adorable the way he blushed and kissed the hell out of Billy. Like he genuinely didn't care the way his present had been wrapped, like he had appreciated the intention behind it – and besides Billy would rather be caught dead than ever admit that he had actually put a lot of thought into the gift.

So to put a stop to those thoughts and because Billy could admit his own feelings only so much of the night, he pressed closer to Steve, a hand gently cupping his left cheek as he tattooed small kisses against Steve's skin. Small butterfly kisses on the cheek, barely there and gone the next. Tiny licks against his jaw just so Billy could have a taste of precious salty skin. Breathly little whooshes of sounds in his ear as he inhaled deeply against Steve's throat. Finally, small sips of precious lips, still no more than sweet presses. Steve melted into his body and Billy wanted so much. He wanted. And he felt selfish for that somehow.

"I want to see you naked," he whispered in Steve's ear and bit gently the earlobe. Steve moaned this time breathless and loud in the quietness of the room. "Would you allow it?"

"Yes," came the breathy reply as Steve pressed his forehead against Billy's shoulder. "I'm scared though," he confessed in the thin material. "I've never done this before. With a boy."

"I'm scared too," Billy answered, turning his nose into Steve's hair. His scent was so intoxicating, it lured the truth out of Billy. "I'm scared because it matters for the first time."

A small shift and Steve's arms came to his waist, holding tighter.

"Can I touch you too?" Steve asked quietly. "Would you allow it?"

"I'd allow anything to you, Steve." The terrible truth seemed to hit them at the same time for both of them tightened the hug.

"Let's go to my room."

They quietly made their way up the stairs, hands intertwined but not looking at each other. A small lamp was lit on the nightstand, spilling a faint light across the room. As soon as Billy closed the door, he got an armful of Steve who kissed him, this time deeper, more possessive and Billy fell down down down into the other boy's magic. His questing hands sneaked under his t-shirt and mapped that lovely back, lips never stopped licking and biting and pushing against Steve.

"I wanna see you, sweetheart," he whispered and Steve blushed heavily but took a step aside and took his t-shirt off. Billy opened three more buttons and his shirt was off as well.

"Why the fuck do you look so good?" Steve muttered and came back, pressing Billy against the door and kissing the hell out of him. The level of intimacy was dizzying for Billy, he had never had that with a boy before. This level of exploring felt a bit overwhelming when it was directed at him. To take his mind off the sudden shift in his thoughts, he opened Steve's belt and pushed jeans and underwear down. He then quickly acted with his own as well and suddenly there they were, all naked, standing in front of each other, blushing and shy because it matter it mattered and that's all there was.

Then Steve grinned at Billy and laid on the bed and Billy had to grin back and scooted over and suddenly their bodies were flushed against each other and on fire. For a moment, Billy let himself be overwhelmed by his hunger – the spellbinding way in which they belonged to each other's arms – and kiss Steve, plunging his tongue deep into his mouth, hot and slick, thoroughly exploring the other boy, while Steve gave him the freedom to do it and opened his mouth slightly more. The generosity of the gesture was spellbinding leaving him lightheaded and it took Billy a while to calm down enough to pull away, leaning his forehead against Steve's.

"I want to touch you," Steve said fervently, "God, I need to touch you." And had Billy been himself, he might have pointed out that they were already touching, bodies so close Billy didn't know anymore where he began and Steve ended. But as such, dizzy with the taste of Steve on his lips, he turned on his side and laid himself bare in front of the other boy's scrutiny. It was a breathtaking capitulation.

Steve watched him through his thick eyelashes and gently began to explore. For a boy that had never fooled around with other boys, he really seemed to know what he was doing. He kissed and nipped at Billy's collarbone, small nips of teeth that wouldn't mark Billy for long because apparently, even at the height of his passion, Steve was able to think about what the consequences would be for Billy if his father would see anything suspicious.

But Steve's hands were searing as heat and pleasure spiraled up Billy's spine – they were gentle as they moved across Billy's body, over and over again as if they were blessing him. Everything about Billy's body seemed fascinating to Steve as he kissed and caressed and at some point Billy had to pull him back to kiss the hell out of him, hot and pressing. Those deft fingers marked and touched everywhere, and Billy tried hard to match Steve in fervor – hands traveling over those bony shoulders, down his back as each kiss became more and more intense, more clashes of teeth and swipes of tongue than anything else.

Then Billy slid his hands down that trim waist, then further down to the curve of Steve's ass, and grabbing the back of his thighs, he turned them around so that he was laying now on top of Steve.

They both groaned in pleasure at the delicious way in which their cocks touched, hard and slick. Steve wrapped his legs around Billy's waist as one hand ran through his hair and grabbed a handful at the back of Billy's nape. Lightly, Steve pulled at it, titling Billy's head just so and kissing him all over again. Steve's little moans of pleasure were music to Billy's ears. Soft breathy sounds that seemed to trickle down Billy's spine. He held Steve close now as if the very idea of space between them was a terrible sin.

Billy began to move his hips in sinuous curves that made Steve lean

his head back against the pillow and close his eyes in pleasure, breathing hot and ragged. The pleasure was building up more and more, pooling in a mind-blowing way at the base of his back and deep down in his belly just as Steve began to kiss him again lazily, more of sharing their breath rather than anything else. But it was enough. Billy snaked a hand between them and started to jerk off Steve, who leaned his head back against the pillow, offering himself to Billy. And Billy couldn't refuse such a generous offer as he licked and nipped and kissed that neck until a few strokes later, Steve came with a deep moan all over his fingers.

Billy stopped from his ministrations and watched Steve's flushed face twisted in pleasure, wild and free. And when those doe eyes opened up again and those deft fingers began to caress Billy again, he knew he couldn't resist much longer. He tried to hide away from those burning eyes by nuzzling his neck, but Steve wouldn't let him.

"No, come on, I want to see you," he whispered and pulled a little harder on Billy's hair. Steve bit Billy's bottom lip then gently licked it. "I want to see you, King Billy."

The pleasure was sudden and unexpected in its intensity, but when Steve's arms came around his shoulders, his legs tightening around his hips, Billy stared back into those beautiful brown eyes and let himself sink in the depths of that nameless affection.

Billy felt owned. He felt grounded and the powerlessness that came with such an alluring sensation seemed to tear him open.

He wanted to get off Steve afterward, but the other boy just tightened his grip and Billy abandoned the idea. He knew that Steve wasn't comfortable because Billy was wider and heavier than him, but it appeared to not matter because Steve held him a long time afterward. He nuzzled against his cheek and let himself breathe and let himself be held. He basked into this mesmerizing affection and let himself breathe.

And later on, after they cleaned themselves up and Billy held Steve as the boy fell into a lazy slumber, he let himself drown in a pool of doubts.

Because Billy had never had genuine affection shown to him since his mother had died. Had never had a boy like Steve in his arms. And when it came to the losers of the world, Billy had always been one of them. It was hard to convince himself otherwise.

It was precisely this gentleness of the night, the way they had held each other that had been enough, which sowed the seeds of doubt in Billy's mind more than anything else.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much [lambchop33](#) for the beta. All the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. This chapter should also be named *if the author of the fanfic would stop re-writing scenes or add scenes up, that would be awesome* and it should have ended in a terrible cliffhanger but I think no one would have appreciated it so I stopped myself. Next week, the final chapter and the epilogue. :)

Trivia time:

I made Billy a Stephen King fan because somehow it suited him in my own twisted mind. Also, Stephen King is a self-proclaimed fan of The Ramones, Metallica, Anthrax, Judas Priest – see where I am going with this? :)))) Both *Pet Semetary* and *Cycle of the Werewolf* were published in 1983 and Marty Coslaw is the main character in *Cycle of the Werewolf*. *Salem's Lot* was published in 1975. Also, Stephen King published under the Richard Bachman alias *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in five installments under the editorship of Edward L. Ferman from 1977 to 1981. Moreover, I also thought it would suit some of the kids to have read his books as well, hence Dustin and Will have become the lucky winners.

I was terribly saddened by the news of Ursula K. Le Guin's death this week. She was a visionary and a badass and I hope she gets to discuss literature and

political issues with the other awesome minds in the great beyond. *The Beginning Place* was published in 1980.

Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, published in 1968, stood as the original material for *Blade Runner* (1982) – a movie that I remember seeing when I was ten or eleven at a friend's house; I didn't get much of anything and uhm, we weren't supposed to watch it anyway, but I remember making a strong impression on me. Later on, I re-watched it and I loved it.

All the music on the mixtape predates 1985 and I would recommend all the songs because they are awesome.

As always, if you've made it this far, thank you for reading. :)

5. Saint Christopher - Part One

Summary for the Chapter:

“Are you going to do something stupid?” Max asked as she glanced at him, startling him out of his revelry. “You’re never this quiet unless you’re about to do something stupid.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Saint Christopher is the patron saint of travelers, drivers, bookbinders, and surfers. Yes, quite an eclectic group. :)

March arrived with heavy rains and downcast skies.

The barren lands grated on Billy's nerves. Everything was painted in shades of grey: the bleak houses, the trees and their cloying scent, the never-ending fields that still smelled of cow shit, the narrow streets, and even the people. There were no splashes of color anywhere, the absence of it suffocating Billy like a too-tight and scratchy blanket. His skin felt tight and brittle around the edges, the familiar anger wrapping around him like a well-worn coat.

Because he had dislocated his shoulder twice now, the doctors prohibited him from participating in any sports activity for at least nine more weeks. When they had mentioned this first, Billy had been too out of it. However, when he went to Dr. Leonard for another follow-up, the good doctor made it loud and clear: there would be no serious activities involving any contact sport or any work out session for at least several weeks unless Billy would risk a serious injury and therefore operation. And while the operation wasn't something of a life or death situation, it would still put a massive strain on the ligaments and the popped up joint. Billy might have slammed the door on his way out, but accepted the advice of the doctor – well, *accepted* might have been too of a strong word because basically Dr. Leonard didn't give him a medical note declaring him fit and healthy therefore coach Lawrence said Billy Hargrove had another thing coming if he thought coach would let him on the court without a

note from his doctor.

Therefore, in spite of several efforts on Billy's part and even more whining to which he'd never admitted to, he was benched. Suddenly, all that pent-up energy pressed against the seams of his own person and it didn't help the fact that Hopper told him to take a hike as well when he mentioned about re-starting the work out sessions. Fuck, but he missed punching the boxing bag so bad.

"Hey, Hargrove," Tommy had yelled from across the corridor the following morning when the news of his dismissal had spread like wildfire, "not so big and important now, are you?"

"Firstly, learn some fucking English, Tommy boy, or you might end up picking the fucking garbage after me," Billy had tossed back, grinning like a shark that seemed to freeze the blood in pretty much every student in Hawkins High present on the corridor. "Secondly, come closer and say that to my face, fucking dickhead, and I'll make a personal demonstration of my strength. Unless I spoke too many words for you to understand."

Tommy Hanlon – and no, Billy wasn't going to touch this with a ten foot pole – might have been stupid but sometimes was too brash so when he made his way towards Billy, the sea of students had split like The Red Sea.

"Did you just fucking call me retarded?" Tommy had growled right in Billy's face. Carol had grabbed his arm and pulled back in a feeble attempt to calm him down. While she hated Billy quite a lot, she was aware that he wouldn't stop from throttling her boyfriend in front of the whole school.

"I can't call you retarded, Hanlon, if you're one already," Billy had answered deceptively calm, hands fisted by his side and back straightening. He had already anticipated Tommy's move and the fucking dickhead didn't disappoint. Bringing a leg forward, Tommy shook Carol away and brought his arm back. Billy was already grinning like a fucking maniac since he had been itching for a fucking fight for ages. But he was sorely disappointed when Tommy's punch was cut short by a strong hand capturing his wrist and pulling him back hard. The momentum had been so strong that fucking Tommy

lost his balance and fell forwards almost kneeling in front of fucking Steve, who in that particular moment had looked like a vengeful king – again Billy would never mention this out loud but it had been fucking hot. Also fucking rude.

“What the fuck, Harrington?” The words had tumbled out of his mouth more outraged than even Tommy's groan of pain. Steve tightened his grip on the dickhead's wrist and had the gesture not pissed him off so much by intervening, Billy would have been terribly aroused.

“Touch him and you're fucking dead, Tommy,” Steve hissed, not even bothering to look at Billy. If looks could have killed, then Tommy Hanlon would have been long dead.

“Let me go, asshole!”

“Stop whining like a fucking bitch, Tommy,” Steve had said but had finally let go. Tommy had stood up, rubbing his wrist as Carol stepped closer to him. Steve had crossed his arms over his chest and had jutted his stubborn chin. “Besides, I'm saving your ass – Hargrove here would probably kick your ass ten ways from Sundays.”

“Oh, don't worry, Harrington, me and Tommy here are going to have a proper conversation later on about respect and keeping his big mouth shut,” Billy had sneered and had taken a step forward. He had been so pissed off that he could have got into a fight even with Steve at that point.

“From one king to another, I fully support showing the proper etiquette of not running one's fucking stupid mouth.” Steve had finally looked back at Billy, something unhinged behind the fire in his eyes. The look had been searing and Billy couldn't help remembering the screams of horror that sometimes Steve had released in the dead of the night when nightmares had kept both of them awake and Billy had wondered what horrors Steve had seen. If the monsters that he had mentioned so long ago had been in fact real all along. Nonetheless, in that particular moment, Billy had felt owned by the knowledge that Steve Harrington knew him too fucking well. Something dangerous had clenched Billy's chest and pressed against his ribs.

"You'll never do this again," he had hissed later that evening when they had met at the quarry and he had pinned Steve's body against his Beemer. "I fight my own fucking battles."

"Not when I'm around." Steve had grabbed the lapels of his coat and pulled hard at them. "If you think even for a second that you'll always get away with whatever the fuck you're planning on your own, you got another thing coming, Hargrove. I don't play games when it comes to relationships. You're itching for a fight, you come to me." The abrupt press of lips had come like an electric shock and Billy had released a shuddery sigh. He had been anchored by Steve's possessive kisses and strong hands.

That moment had been enough for the stupid assholes in the basketball team to give them a wide berth. They were no longer invited to parties or hangouts. However, on the basketball court, Steve owned their fucking asses so coach Lawrence kept him as captain of the team. Which in turn made Tommy sulk more, which in turn made everyone enjoy more coming to the basketball games. Because they were winning big time. Billy couldn't play but he sure as hell liked to give indications from the bench and after being told a few times to shut his goddamn trap and he defiantly ignored the kind advice, coach Lawrence let him participate and train his teammates, especially the captain. And while socially they were no longer interacting with their teammates much, on the basketball court Steve and Billy owned their asses. It was glorious and somehow their popularity had increased tenfold, especially Steve's.

This peculiar turn of events wouldn't have troubled Billy much, he wouldn't have fucking cared because at that point he was actually actively working hard to get the fuck out of Hawkins. He wouldn't have cared. He wouldn't. Had it not been for several things that were happening roughly around the same time.

He flicked the cigarette through the open window, *The Hammer* from Motorhead blaring through the speakers. Fuck, it was soothing to have the familiar rage of the song pumping through his veins. He parked the car in front of the garage in his spot before cutting off the engine. He took a deep breath then growled and hit the steering wheel a few times for good measure. Fucking little shitheads and fucking Harrington for indulging them. On a fucking Friday night no

less!

Billy slammed the door of the car so hard the Camaro actually rocked hard, before it settled. He barely mumbled a hello to Lennie who was bent over a Buick and didn't pay much attention to anything, the familiar radio buzzing through its small speakers. Benny was inside his office with two guys and Billy was for once grateful for being ignored. He closed the door to the staffroom and sat on the bench. His elbows dug deep into the meat of his thighs as he propped his chin into his hands. His foot was jittery though and he felt restless again, his hands itching for a fight that most likely he couldn't win, but he needed it like he needed air.

He thought... The fuck he thought? That acting like a clingy pussy was going to make Harrington drop everything suddenly just for him? Billy hit his forehead with the heel of his palm several times. Yeah, that's exactly what he thought at the time. Especially after Valentine's Day when they'd celebrated like that. He thought... It was stupid to think that all of a sudden he'd have Harrington's undivided attention. Because in a way he had it and in a way, he didn't and he fucking hated the thought. He carded his fingers through his hair and pulled harshly at it a few more times before he stood up and started to change into his mechanic uniform.

The problem with Harrington was that when he offered his attention to somebody, that person felt the center of his world. Billy definitely did feel that way. But for a person like Billy, who rarely enjoyed the attention and affection of someone, it was quite dangerous to offer him this in small doses. Since Valentine's Day, they could barely squeeze in two more nights spent together as Harrington's parents had returned to Hawkins, even quarry time suddenly limited. Plus there was all that driving around dropping one kid or another to the arcade, to each other's places, to the fucking moon, sometimes talking in riddles or having inside jokes that Billy never got the meaning of. Max seemed to be the only person to understand his frustration, but even she contributed to the whole fucking mess.

Billy's arm stuck in a sleeve and he growled in frustration as he snatched it out brutally, painfully jarring his still healing ribs. The abrupt and sharp pain jabbed in his side and he took several small and sharp breaths trying to calm down. He punched the locker in

frustration.

The sentiment of inadequacy had built block upon block inside of him. Sooner or later, he would lose Steve and it would most certainly be because of those nerds. Because while Billy may be good for discussions about literature and other geeky stuff that apparently left Harrington impassible, he was still the enemy in their eyes. Or maybe not the enemy anymore, but definitely an outsider. They could see that he was good for nothing and that Steve could do so much better than him. And if they thought like this when they only perceived Billy as Steve's slightly deranged friend, then what would happen later on, if the word would come out about their relationship? They would make Steve choose between their secret party, oh so difficult to get into, or stupid fucking crazed Billy. And guess it wasn't that difficult to tell which side Steve would take.

Fucking Christ but he was so fucking bored with this girly ass shit!

He got out of the room and stomped his feet all the way to the Ford pickup truck that he had been working on since yesterday. His hands were shaking as he opened the goddamn hood, wondering if it would be that easy for Steve to choose one side or the other. The sickening thought alone made something dreadful and disgusting stir inside his chest – some sane part of him wouldn't want to ever put Steve in that position, but another less sane and more awful part would enjoy the drama. It would confirm all of Billy's awful thoughts.

Billy grabbed the edges of the car and squeezed tightly as he took several deep breaths. And this was just because Steve refused to meet with him tonight as he had to attend a stupid ass party at the Byers' place where everyone was invited, except him. Billy fucking hated those people in that moment, even his sister because at least she'd get to be with Harrington and laugh at his stupid jokes and listen to the weird connections that he'd make. Steve was really good at making weird connections.

The phone rang in the office.

It rang and rang and rang until Billy could hear Benny picking it up and dropping it back into the fork without even saying anything. The reaction made him curious enough to forget about his jealousy (first

of all there was no fucking jealousy involved and second of all, why the fuck his sardonic interior voice sounded suddenly just like fucking Max?). He skilfully tilted his head to get a closer look at the men in Benny's office, for one moment afraid that his friend was in danger. Although, perhaps it was those men that were in danger for Benny dominated over them with his height even sitting down at his goddamn desk. The two other men were sitting on the front of it, both of them stocky and well-built, although shorter than Benny. Even for a guy that hadn't been living much time in Hawkins, Billy could sense that these guys weren't from around here.

The one sitting down close to the external windows was red-haired and emanated such a sense of authority that Billy felt bristling just at the sight of him. His hair was carefully combed, pulled on one side and cleanly-shaven. The unassuming manner in which he leaned against the chair talked of a man that was used to being listened to without needing any further explanations. He was saying something to Benny who nodded along.

The other guy, sitting closer to the wall, was actually a different sort of story. He was stockier than the red-haired with wide shoulders that seemed to want to break out of the shirt that unwillingly wrapped around them. He sported a bushy mustache, which he kept petting, and there were some pronounced signs of baldness, which he apparently ignored.

All in all, the men didn't look like disgruntled customers that came to the shop to complain about one job or another, because usually, Billy could hear such customers from a mile away from the garage – he had always been surprised how often Mr. Miller liked to say for fuck's sake, Benny within the same conversation, not that he had been counting. There was also the slight air of menace floating, a sense of awareness that they imposed by simply being in that garage – they gave the impression that they'd seen things and done things, and one couldn't say which ones had been the worst.

Curiosity piqued, Billy ran his fingers through his hair and side-glancing at the office one more time, he pretended he needed Lennie's advice on something and approached the Buick in a hurry, keeping the men in the corner of his eyes at all times.

"Hey, Lennie, who are those guys in Hammond's office?" He asked directly, not even having the decency to pretend to be interested in anything else. The old man took a look over the brim of his glasses inside Benny's office as if only now he noticed that there were people there.

"The red-haired one is Dan Wilson, he works at a GM truck plant down in Fort Wayne. The other one is Nelson Mitchell, he's a rig driver, lives just one hour away from Indianapolis. They served together in Vietnam. If I'm not mistaken, Wilson was their sergeant."

"They look fucking badass," Billy murmured appreciatively, making Lennie actually burst into a dry and bitter laugh.

"If you want to survive a fucking war, boy, you have to be." Lennie glanced down at his hands. "Home as well. Especially in poor states like Indiana. But don't think that life's gonna treat ya' better just because ya' get to leave it."

"I know, old man," Billy said, waving dismissively his hand.

"Then if you're done gossiping like an old woman, how about ya' let me be. Get back to work, boy!"

"Lennie, you're lucky that you're older than me. Like way older." Lennie chuckled and shook his head like saying *Can you believe this guy?* before returning his attention back to the car at hand, while Billy returned to his station.

This sudden reunion between fellow brothers of arms didn't sit well with Billy for some reason. He couldn't explain the weariness but it was there – they seemed to discuss an important topic for they were tense and made few gestures. Billy turned his attention back to the pickup truck trying to find out what was wrong with the disk brake, suspecting that the brake pads had been damaged. He wasn't aware when the two men left, but when he looked up again, Benny was stretching sighing heavily.

"What was that about?" Billy asked as soon as Benny came within earshot. The giant just shrugged and made a gimme gesture. Billy took out his pack of smokes and gave one to him. Benny lit it up and

took a long drag, still coughing a little.

"Nothing to worry about your pretty little head."

"First of all, I'm not little or pretty." Billy scowled at him. "Second of all, it didn't look like nothing. That Wilson guy looks like he could eat you for breakfast."

"I see Lennie opened his big mouth again," Benny said a little louder towards the end to make sure that the old man had heard them, but Lennie just waved him off. "It's personal but nothing to worry about. So don't worry."

"Whatever, jolly giant."

"Ugh, someone got his panties in a twist." Benny took another drag from the cigarette. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Billy looked back at the car, still holding the clipper in his hand. "I think we need to change the brake pads on this one."

"Both front?"

"Yeah."

"Gordon won't like that."

"He'd like it even less when he would swerve from the road and get himself killed," Billy said and stared back at Benny.

"Care to tell him that in person?" Benny took a last drag and stubbed the cigarette under his work boot. "Or want to share with the class what happened that got you so mad?"

"Doesn't matter. Nothing serious."

"I hope it wasn't your dad."

"No, don't worry about it." Billy dismissed him with a slight wave of his hand then rubbed the back of his head. He was in no mood to invent a fucking fight with Harrington and make it look like a friendly squabble. At the end of the day, Harrington wasn't aware

how much Billy had wanted to spend the night with him, especially since Max was having a sleepover at Hopper's place – apparently, she was good friends with Hopper's adoptive daughter. Like who knew?

Benny hummed in agreement because he knew when not to push Billy's buttons and checked the brake pads as well, "Yeah, definitely need changing. I'll give Gordon a call, see what he says."

"Okay." Benny was already making his way back to the office when Billy opened his goddamn mouth just one more time. "Are you sure everything's fine?"

"Yeah, little Skywalker, everything's fine."

"Quoting Star Wars at me won't make you cooler, Chewie." Billy frowned at him even harder when Benny burst out laughing.

"That's what you think." Benny winked at him then got back into his office and Billy had to flip him off on principle alone. The rest of the afternoon was spent working hard and without much conversation. The radio had kept on throwing one song after another and Billy let himself be pulled out of his thoughts. He changed the brake pads for Gordon's pickup when he got the okay from Benny and invoiced the man, before beginning to work on a four-door Chevrolet Impala from 1977 with some fuel gauge problem.

"Excuse me, could you please have a look at my car?" The question had come so out of the blue that it startled Billy enough to drop his wrench. He looked up fast enough to give himself a whiplash prepared to give the guy some chosen words only to be met with Harrington's grinning face.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Billy grinned back. "I thought you'd be at Byers' place till later."

"There's only so much awkwardness that I can take." Steve passed his fingers through his hair and leaned against the Impala. "Jonathan was trying to keep his hands away from Nancy and she threw guilty glances at me each time she kissed him – I thought we were past that stage by now. Not to mention that the kids had way too much sugar." Steve smiled softer. "I managed though to guilt-tripping Nancy and

Jonathan into dropping all of the kids at home.”

“How Henderson felt about that?”

“Dustin was the one that secured you a slice of cake so don't be an asshole the next time you get to see him.”

“I'm actually touched.” Billy mockingly brought his hand to his heart but secretly he was actually oddly moved by the small gesture. “Is it chocolate cake?”

“Yeah.” Billy came to rest next to Steve, their bodies touching closely. Steve nudged him with his shoulder and smiled. “Can you stay over tonight?”

“Yeah.” Billy checked the watch and noticed that it was already eight ten so technically he could leave, but he didn't feel like moving. Steve was smelling of expensive cologne and beer, his hair floppier than usual. He was a hot line against his body and Billy's hands itched to touch him, to press him against the car and kiss the hell out of him.

“Harrington, thank God you're here! Maybe you can find out what Billy's been in such a foul mood today.”

“Fuck off, Benny!”

“Respect your elders, Billy. How many times do I have to tell you that?” Benny came closer and shook hands with Steve who smirked. “How're things? Heard you guys won another match.”

“Yeah, apparently grumpy pants here is an even better coach. Like who knew?” Steve tossed back, his smirk getting wider and Billy rolled his eyes at both of them.

“Wow, you guys think you're so goddamn funny. Fucking Abbott and Costello right here!”

“And don't you forget it!” Benny smiled and checked the watch. “Come on, get going. I need to lock up and pretend I don't spend most of my life in this shop.”

“Want me to help?”

"No, go away!" Benny made his way towards the shutters. "Get out of here! Go and do whatever young kids do these days. See you tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, yeah, see you old man!" Billy pushed at Steve, who was chuckling. "I'll grab my clothes and follow you to the car."

"Okay." Steve went to Benny to shake hands again as Billy almost ran to the staff room to wash quickly and change his clothes. Lennie was already there pulling his coat on.

"What's your hurry, boy?"

"Steve came by. We're going out tonight." Billy tossed his uniform in his old locker and pulled his jeans on before leaning against the sink and washing quickly under his arms and around his neck. He tossed a *good night* to Lennie who got out and greeted back, before washing his stained hands several times. He pulled his t-shirt over followed by a flannel shirt, which he left open. He quickly used a bit of deodorant and ran his fingers through his hair. He pulled his coat on and switched the light off before leaving the room.

The shutters were already pulled down and Benny was waiting for him at the main entrance still checking all the machines that they had used that day, ensuring that nothing was left plugged or on.

"See you tomorrow morning, old man," Billy snarked as he punched Benny's shoulder lightly before stepping back fast. But Benny just shook his head.

"See ya! And bring some good coffee tomorrow morning. It's your turn."

"Whatever."

Billy followed Steve's car on the dark streets of Hawkins, smoking cigarette after cigarette, tension making him drum his fingers against the steering wheel. Metallica's *Kill 'Em All* album was playing song after song after song but the music didn't soothe him as it usually did. The familiar guitar riffs seemed only to increase the hunger that was traveling down through his veins, his need for Steve almost a

palpable thing.

This odd inquietude had marred most of their time alone since Valentine's Day celebration. Max's words had only added fuel to the fire of doubt that had been simmering inside of Billy thus his need for Steve had only increased exponentially. A whole month had passed since that night and yet the hunger, this absolute craving for everything related to Steve had pushed many times through his veins like thick molasses about to engulf everything. It didn't help that Steve was more than generous with his own person when it came to Billy, his kisses and his stammered tiny noises of pleasure were the perfect drugs for Billy.

As soon as they got inside the house, Billy slammed Steve against the door, pushing a thigh in between his legs and kissing the hell out of him. There was no gentleness left in him. The kiss was a clash of tongues and teeth, biting nips and no air, his broad hands curling possessively against the bony hips. Each time Steve was trying to soften the kisses, Billy would only press hotter and meaner, fiercer and harsher. However, Steve was nothing if not cunning when it came to Billy. While he stopped trying to take control over the kisses, Steve slowly began to move sinuously against him, hands in the quest for patches of skin, which they found quickly.

Steve was long and lean against his body, maybe even an inch or two taller than Billy – Billy would have rather dropped dead than ever admit to that truth out loud – and Billy's wider body shielded him. While Billy kissed Steve like a man possessed by greed, Steve's hands moved surely over Billy's back, deft fingers pressing against each knob, scratching tenderly and marking him. And when they moved lower over the curve of his ass and cupped his cheeks, Billy gasped and pushed against his hands, a maddening sort of pleasure raising low inside his belly.

"There you are," Steve murmured catching his eyes. The tenderness in them scrapped Billy raw.

"I can't, Steve," he admitted terribly in a broken voice, his words just patches of intention never taken to the finish line. "Please don't make me, sweetheart."

"You can't what?" Steve tried to speak again but Billy kissed him roughly, that knife-edged passion back again. Billy couldn't find it in him to tell Steve he wouldn't be able to stand the affection at the moment – he could barely breathe and he was already feeling apart, like a dandelion about to be blown away by the wind. He was overwhelmed and he was fucked up and it made him want to howl. Skin tight, leaving him barely room enough to breathe. Kept together by Steve's hands and kisses, but still too much.

"Let's go to my room." Steve pushed him a bit and it was enough to dislodge Billy. He'd never again hurt Steve. *Never*. "I want you to tell me what you need, Billy," Steve said as soon as he closed the door behind them. "Because I don't know what you need and there are no known cues for me. I've never done this before."

"I need you to let me touch you," Billy growled in his ear as he pulled Steve to his chest again. "I want to put my hands and my mouth on you." If Billy could only drown into the oblivion that Steve's body always seemed to provide for him. "I want to suck you off." Steve shuddered in pleasure, arms suddenly floppy around Billy's shoulders as if it was a magic game.

And in spite of all the pleasure that made his eyes glassy, Steve still kissed the hell out of Billy, biting his bottom lip and smiling when Billy hissed in pleasure. The steadiness and breathlessness of their kissing anchored Billy in a way he had never thought possible – like a kite out in the wind, Steve's lips felt like that steady hand keeping a hold on the rope. It soothed him and made him aware enough to push Steve further and further until the back of his knees hit the bed and he sat down.

Billy sank to his knees at once. Pushing Steve's jumper slightly up, he pressed his nose against Steve's belly, taking a deep breath. Fuck, Steve's scent left his mouth watering. He pushed tighter against the skin and took another deep breath, Steve's hands gently running through his hair. Then he sucked a mean and hot deep bruise in that creamy skin, hoping that he'd leave his mark, that he'd make Steve his at least for the time being. He dragged his thumbs over his belly as he curled his hands on the bony hips and fiercely sucked at another patch of skin over Steve's right hip.

They stood there like that for ages, Billy letting himself be wrapped around Steve's touches and his caresses while he scrapped his teeth over each patch of skin he could touch, sucking and teasing, making a mess out of this man. Steve's little moans of pleasure, his sharp inhales and the way his fingers would tense into Billy's curls lit a fire of pleasure that licked over Billy's spine.

"Oh, sweetheart," he heard himself speaking into Steve's skin, hoarse and needy, "you don't know what you do to me." Steve's breath stuttered in his chest. His hands tightened into Billy's curls. "You make me mad, sweetheart. You make me insane," he confessed into that hot skin and finally *finally* licked a generous strip of it. The taste exploded on his tongue. Steve released a soft moan. "I can't get enough of you, sweetheart. I could never get enough of you."

Billy opened the buttons of his jeans, gently making Steve stand up just a little so he could pull both underwear and jeans at the same time, then slightly pushed Steve back. Dizzy with need – fuck, it was so awesome to concentrate on Steve's deep moans – Billy mouthed at the base of Steve's cock, laving it with small licks. He wanted to give Steve the best experience, not only because he cared about him so much, but also because he wanted to push at the boundaries and have him always remember this, even when Steve would be with others. It was this particular brand of selfishness that clenched at Billy's chest, making it feel pinched.

Steve's tiny noises of pleasure were music to his ears but Billy wanted more. So much more. He was so fucking greedy when it came to Steve. He wanted all. He wanted his debauched screams, his own name on his lips like a blessing. Or like a curse.

Billy took the crown of the cock in his mouth and gently sucked it. Steve's hands clenched in his hair almost painfully – it made Billy diamond rock hard in his jeans. But it didn't matter. He wanted more. He tried to take Steve in his mouth as much as he could, using his hand for the rest. As soon as he started on a rhythm, Steve seemed to lose it completely.

"Oh baby, oh sweetheart," he'd babble, each endearment trickling down Billy's spine in molten pleasure. Billy curled his broad palms against his hips and held Steve down as he started to bob his head in

earnest, sucking Steve with all the desperation of a man that knew the beautiful moments like this would finish soon. The need burnt inside his belly hot and bitter and he wanted release but not before sucking Steve deeper, harder. Needy sounds turned into small growls as Steve got with the program and began to gradually move as well. Billy groaned and he started to rut against the floor as he pushed further into the caresses. He pushed himself, further and further until his throat fluttered against Steve's cock and Steve actually shouted his name in pleasure, pulling painfully at Billy's curls. Pride engulfed Billy as he pressed Steve's hips down and didn't allow him to move, nose buried in the curls at the base of his cock.

Billy could feel himself losing himself in Steve's babble, his caresses and his taste, heavy on his tongue, unbearably hot and bitter. He dragged himself a little back until only the crown stayed between his lips and sucked hard. It was enough for Steve to lose it and come down Billy's throat. He sucked him off gently until it became too much and then let himself lean back on his haunches breathing hard and looking up at Steve.

He managed to open just a button of his jeans before Steve grabbed him by the shirt and kissed him viciously and just as greedy. His tongue licked his own taste from the inside of Billy's mouth until they both tasted the same. Then he opened the rest of Billy's jeans and shoved his hand inside. It took just a couple of broad strokes to make Billy surge into another desperate kiss and come all over Steve's hand, dizzy in the sickly-sweet smell of sex between the two of them. Steve's scent was intoxicating and Billy let him drag his hand over Billy's nape and pull him into another searing kiss. A bone-deep satisfaction melted against Billy's ribs, taking the edge of things slightly off.

"You taste so fucking amazing," Steve whispered as he scrapped his teeth against Billy's jaw, ensuring not to leave any mark. He pushed on Billy's shoulders until he was the one laying down on the bed while Steve settled between his legs uncaring of the mess between them. He took his jumper off and wiped at both of them before pressing back against Billy. His warm and hot look lingered on Billy's face, making his hackles rise.

"I'm not a girl, Steve. You don't need to-"

"My king," Steve muttered as if he didn't hear Billy talking. His lips curled into a warm smile as Billy flushed and his cock gave a slightly interested twitch. Growling slightly, Steve ducked down again and kissed Billy savagely, licking at the seams, his fingers pressing against Billy's ribs, making him feel owned and unbearably anchored. Steve moved down his lips and teeth marking gently each patch of skin. He pushed at Billy's jeans and underwear until Billy got with the program and he slid them off completely. Steve followed his lead and soon they were naked in bed on their sides watching each other, Billy already half hard again, Steve's taste and scent intoxicating.

"Will you let me kiss you now?" Steve mumbled at last as he pulled himself closer to Billy, who found himself smirking, although his heart was hammering against his chest so loud he was actually surprised that Steve didn't hear it.

"What have we been doing so far?"

"I want you to let me kiss you the way I want to," Steve pressed the matter further. His hand curled gently against his shoulder, his fingers hot and branding. Steve nuzzled against his cheek. "I want to kiss you."

"I-"

"C'mon, baby, let me do it." Steve's breath against his cheek was maddening. He rubbed his cheek against Billy's cheek as his hand now rested easily on Billy's hip. Billy's eyes fluttered closed as he let Steve kiss him at last. A fire churned into his stomach, licking at his ribs, pooling tightly inside his belly and across his spine.

There were just small kisses at the beginning – nothing more than pressing of lips, tightly closed and small licks over his bottom lip. Billy heard himself giving away a small moan as if in agony and Steve closed the distance between them, switching their position again. Billy's hand wrapped around his creamy shoulders as Steve leaned forward and this time kissed him more intensely, pressing inside of him, licking at his teeth, all-encompassing, but slowly, all so fucking slowly.

"Please, sweetheart," Billy murmured in defeat when Steve let him

breathe at last. He blinked open as Steve's big brown eyes watched him with naked affection and something deeper, something stronger that pulled at all of Billy's strings. His chest filled up with an overbearing warmth, profound and overfilling. "I can't, Steve, please, sweetheart, please," he pleaded because each gentle kiss dug only more into his ribs, this strange affection for Steve burying even deeper.

Steve started to move slowly as he bracketed Billy's head in between his forearms. He was touching him like Billy was made out of the most precious metal, like something worthy of worship, like all the good things in the world had been stuffed inside of him. Steve leaned forward and pressed again. Tenderly, not talking. Billy had tried to destroy this boy with fists and words that cut deeper than a knife. He had inflicted hard scars and tender wounds. Now, in return, he was subjected to a different sort of torture.

Billy was flayed raw, ribs wide opened and heart revealed for Steve's taking. Each kiss pressed into his skin undid him more than any slap and any punch he had received from his father. He was drowning in an almost painful pleasure wave, the naked affection in Steve's caresses pulling wave after wave of moans from somewhere deep inside of Billy. They were both hard again and when Steve pressed closer against his body, a sudden spasm of pleasure jolted his entire body. Steve pressed harder as he kissed him deeper and more voraciously and Billy dug his fingers tighter into his shoulders as he spilled messily between them, followed shortly by Steve.

Billy wrapped his arms around Steve holding one and on and on as he breathed him in. Then Steve raised his head again and began to kiss Billy lazily, a simmering hunger still lingering inside of his chest. They kissed for long minutes, small presses and deeper ones, tongues dancing around each other, out of breath again and again. When at last Steve raised his head and looked at Billy, that familiar feeling of an overwhelming wave hit Billy – Steve was gorgeous with his hair mussed and a wide grin spread on his swollen lips, big brown eyes dark and hot and branding.

Steve opened his mouth once or twice as if ready to spill an undeniable truth but in the end, he settled on, "You're so gorgeous, baby."

Billy swallowed thickly as he ran his fingers through Steve's hair, before cupping his cheek with one hand, thumb pressing against his cheekbone. He had never been good with gentleness, well, not since his mother had died, but he wanted to offer it to Steve.

"And you are amazing, sweetheart," Billy murmured and when Steve bashfully ducked his head, Billy kissed his forehead. "You are so incredible," and Billy rubbed his cheek against Steve's. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, not even me."

"I'm not that amazing, but as long as I'm amazing for you, that's fine by me." Steve's flushed face came into focus again.

"You're always selling yourself short, Steve." Billy held on, aware how their bodies still seemed molded together, unaware though where he began and Steve ended. "And you shouldn't. You're worth ten of me." Billy bit his lip. He needed to take this off his chest in case he wouldn't get the chance to do so later. Steve leaned forward and kissed him softly, his big eyes liquid with sudden emotion. He cupped Billy's cheeks and tilted his head just so he could deepen the kiss.

"Your worth to me is much bigger." Steve pressed light kisses on Billy's nose and eyes and forehead.

Billy was flayed open again and he held Steve in his arms for a lot longer as the other boy snoozed on him. Billy couldn't make himself whisper all the things he had wanted to say for so long. He couldn't tell Steve that sometimes when he couldn't sleep in that fucking house of his, he would close his eyes in the dark and dream of a small life with Steve. He dreamed moving to New York or Seattle and renting a crappy apartment. He lay there in the dark and thought of all the ways they could have a wonderful life. He thought about how he'd work and support Steve through college, how they'd save each other from nightmares time and time again.

His arms tighten around Steve, who made a cute snuffling noise. In the dark of the house, he'd picture them together like this, a life in which he deserved Steve Harrington.

Billy watched the night light in the room because Steve hated the

dark and couldn't sleep if all the lights were off. In spite of all the doubts, in spite of knowing that he wasn't worthy of it, in spite of thinking that he was fucking white trash and probably would end up a pretty big fuck up, Billy still desperately wanted Steve Harrington to be a part of his life.

It would destroy him when the time came to say goodbye. He needed to act soon because he wouldn't be able to stand much longer the emptiness that followed him at times. He rubbed his cheek against Steve's warm one. But he could have one more night.

Billy closed his eyes and let himself come alive for just a little while longer.

~O~

Saturday morning, Steve woke up with him. He made them coffee and they had chocolate cake for breakfast. Billy took a shower and changed his clothes then kissed Steve for ten minutes straight in the pale morning light, toffee-sweet and fuzzy. Steve looked gorgeous in a blue t-shirt and basketball shorts, cold feet, and floppy hair. Billy seemed to unfold again with each kiss.

"Call in sick," Steve murmured as he held on to Billy's shirt, forehead against forehead.

"I wish I could do that but Benny would actually kill me," Billy nuzzled his cheek. "Wanna go to the movies this evening? They're showing the Indiana Jones movies."

"What time do they start?" Steve asked as he softly kissed Billy.

"Seven. Meet in front at six thirty?"

"Sounds good."

They kissed one more time before Steve finally let Billy leave for work, the Camaro rumbling loudly on the quiet and mostly deserted streets as Led Zeppelin blared through the speakers. He worked hard and joked with Benny and Lennie throughout the day before closing the shop soon after lunch.

On his way back home, Billy felt himself changing. He squirmed a few times in the driver's seat as his back began to straighten and his shoulders to tense. It was like shedding skin, like falling back in familiar patterns, wearing an old coat that he kind of hoped didn't fit anymore but somehow still did. Billy hated the way he'd listen to music louder as if it could drown his fear and frustration, how he'd smoke more than the usual because there was still so much tension in the house when it came to him, one could have cut it with a blunt knife.

The house was quiet when he let himself in. He could hear Susan cooking in the kitchen but the radio was switched off. There was something jarring in the way the pots and the pans hit each other. Nonetheless, he went there to greet her because otherwise, his father would have one more thing to correct Billy about and Billy wasn't in the fucking mood to hear what a fuck up he was that afternoon.

"Hey," he mumbled when he realized that he had startled Susan, "sorry. I'm home."

"Oh hey, Billy." Susan smiled wanly at him. "All done for today?"

"Yeah, all done. I might catch up a movie with some friends later on."

"Of course," she nodded but she seemed absent-minded. "Could you please go to pick up Max later on? She had a sleepover at Sheriff Hopper's and I didn't have the time to bring her home yet. Your father," and suddenly her voice began to change, modulating each word like a tense line about to break, "is not feeling well."

"Yeah, I could go now in fact." He poured himself a glass of water and drank it one go before turning back to her. "What happened with dad?"

"He had an accident at work." She stirred in the stew and checked if it had enough salt. She was a good cook – Billy had admitted that grudgingly a long time ago – and she had always ensured that he and Max had at least one cooked meal a day. "He's resting now in our room."

“He went to the doctors?”

“He said that the doctor on site attended to him and he gave him some pills.” Susan put the lid back on the pot and her hands slightly trembled as she started to wash some dishes. “I’d advise not to antagonize him today. You know how he is when he’s not feeling well.”

“He’s like that all the time, Susan,” he sneered, “when it comes to me.” He drank another glass of water and looked at the clock. “I think I’ll go and pick up Max now.”

She nodded but didn’t say anything else so Billy went and drove to Hopper’s place, which was in the goddamn woods, in the middle of fucking nowhere. And he thought that the Byers’ place was creepy. Max got out of the house before he could even stop the engine, all ready to go, her hair a flurry of red as she slammed the door of the car and pulled on the seat-belt.

“Hey, asshole, how’s it going?”

“This is how you greet your older brother who was nice enough to come and pick you up?” Billy reversed and turned the car enough to be able to go back on the mud road. “I should have let you walk.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She rolled her eyes at him and fidgeted with the radio. “Also, how come you came to pick me up?”

“Your mum is still cooking and apparently, Neil doesn’t feel well.”

“Interesting,” she shrugged though like she couldn’t give a damn much about what had happened to Neil. “How was your night at Steve’s?” She leered like Billy was actually going to mention anything about whatever the hell he did with Steve the previous night. However, that didn’t stop him from smiling like a fucking idiot.

“None of your goddamn business.”

“Then why are you grinning like a moron?”

“I’m not grinning like a moron, Miss Smile-Each-Time-I-See-Sinclair.”

"Oh, personal attacks now." She shook her head and smiled softly at him. "I'm guessing you guys had fun."

"You guessed correctly." Billy lit a cigarette and opened the window a little to blow the smoke away. He could still feel Steve's weight over his arms, his scent in his nose.

"Did he bring you the cake?"

"Yeah, he told me that Henderson had the idea."

"Yeah, he said something along the lines that chocolate might make you less of an asshole."

"Huh, Steve didn't mention that part." Billy took another drag. "How was your sleepover with Jane?"

"We talked about boys and how stupid they are sometimes and then I showed her how to play some board games." Max grinned sharply. "I might have shown her how to start a car engine too."

"Jesus, Max!"

"Relax!" She punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Besides, who was the one that taught me how to drive when I was only twelve?"

"Yeah, something I shouldn't have done in the first place."

"Those afternoons are the best memories I have of you." Her words punched a hole in his chest and he must have winced because she patted his shoulder as if to console him. "You used to buy me ice-cream afterward and let me tag along at the beach. I think that's why I hated you so much when you started to behave like a prick. I thought you did that just to trick me."

"I didn't."

"But it sure felt that way."

"I guess it did." Billy flicked the cigarette off the window and glanced at Max. "I kind of hated you too at the time," he admitted in a hoarse voice, throat suddenly tight. "I hated the way Neil treated you. He

was acting more like a father to you than he's ever been to me.”

“It's weird, isn't it?” She looked out of the window again. “How one person can be so crappy with some and so loving with others.”

“I guess.” Billy would have said that it was heartbreaking the way his own father used to hate him, a deep kind of hate that seemed endless and painfully blunt in its scope. He would have added that Neil Hargrove had never been a good father and that he would probably never be and that Billy had lost any interest in finding out why the things were like they've always been. “So let me get this straight: you taught the sheriff's daughter to do something which is technically illegal?”

Max burst out laughing, especially when she saw Billy's delighted face. It worked for Max started to talk about how Jane never applied her physical skills (whatever that meant) and how Max had used Hopper's old truck as a lesson tool, while the said sheriff was snoozing on the couch. Billy would have paid good money to see that. Max kept the on-going flow of chatter until Billy parked the car in front of the house and then she became subdued, an after effect of that terrible morning when she had discovered Billy bloodied and broken in his room.

“We're home,” she said as soon as they entered the house and made their way to the kitchen where Susan had just set the table.

“Oh, hey honey.” She smiled and this time her smile reached her eyes. “Did you have a good time?”

“The best.” Max dropped her back and sat down while Billy helped to arrange the pot of stew in the middle of the table. Susan nodding gratefully.

“Thank you, Billy. I'll go and call your father. You kids wash your hands.”

Billy was wiping his hands on a kitchen towel when Neil Hargrove entered the kitchen and gingerly sat at the table without so much as looking at Billy. He was pale, making his features look sharper, tougher, granite-like. His eyes turned a meaner shade of blue too as

Billy took a seat at the table next to him. He could feel himself breaking into a cold sweat but for once Neil Hargrove just nodded in acknowledgment, a barely-there gesture and dug into his food. He was moving gingerly and eating with carefully measure gestures. All in all, Neil truly seemed to be unwell, but Billy had long since lost any interest in caring about what happened to his father. Neil Hargrove not feeling all right meant Billy could have another quiet Saturday night with Steve and that's all he cared about.

Maybe he should have paid more attention. But he didn't, so he continued to eat in silence as Susan and Max talked about his sister's sleep-over.

~O~

The small things were piling up again as Billy paid more attention to Steve rather than his father. Maybe he should have questioned his father's sudden silence, the lack of his snide remarks, the slaps, and the back-handed punches. His father usually kept his distance for about a week or so after a more serious attack, but then he'd be back at his old shenanigans. However, for once he was keeping silent – that had always been a sure sign of terrifying things to come but for once Billy was absorbed by the drama created by his own mind.

Because he had started to pay close attention to the way people viewed his and Steve's friendship, the way they always looked somehow confused how such a loud and big-mouthed guy like Billy could be friends with such a sweet and polite teen like Steve.

He might have agonized more about the whole thing, however, the nail in the proverbial coffin came a few days later. It was a depressing Saturday in Hawkins and there wasn't much to do. Lately, it seemed like all days were gloomy in Hawkins. Spring was a dirty cover over the entire landscape and it was a miracle one didn't hear more about people going insane.

He was checking the oil for old Mr. Hayes – Billy wasn't joking: Mr. Hayes should have had his driving license revoked by now on account of how old he was. Also, Hawkins did indeed have a theme of H names and no one could persuade Billy otherwise. Mr. Hayes had a Ford Galaxie 500 two door with a hard top from 1964 and the

man really took good care of it, because he was still driving it. Well, he was always complaining that he heard one sound or another but at this point, Billy was beginning to think it was the elderly man's imagination. Not that Billy minded – Mr. Hayes was a nice man that always tipped.

"Say young Hargrove," yes, Mr. Hayes did speak like that, "do you think my Betsy will run for another year or two?" Yes, the car was called Betsy after Mr. Hayes' wife, who apparently still gave Mr. Hayes grief despite their ancient age.

"Yes, sir." Billy looked at the oil dipper rod and smiled. "Good news, there's nothing wrong with the oil."

"But this old girl makes an awful sound," Mr. Hayes said mournfully and patted the car a few times with his gnarly hands. "I thought it might be the oil."

"If you don't need it for the weekend, I can have a look at it, see if I can come up with something." Billy put aside the oil dipper rod and checked the oil gauge. Nothing seemed wrong with it, but he couldn't dismiss the claims of the old man, especially since Billy actually liked the goddamn car. It had a pretty cream color and although it wasn't to his taste, Billy could still appreciate other people's cars. Moreover, he kind of understood Mr. Hayes' absurd attachment to his goddamn car since Billy was the same with his Camaro.

"Well, I suppose I could always call Bobby to take me and my missus to church." His bushy white brows furrowed in mild concern. "I'll leave my girl with you then, young Hargrove. See if you find what's wrong with her. I'd appreciate it as always."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Hayes," Billy spoke softly, deciding to spend today an extra hour before going home to check the car thoroughly.

"Good man." Old Mr. Hayes looked over Billy's shoulder and his lips twisted into a pleasant smile. "Hello, Mr. Harrington. How are you, sir?"

Billy swung around as if someone had slapped him and watched senior Harrington stare at him with inscrutable eyes. Billy had met

the Harringtons just once and while he liked Elaine Harrington, not the same could be said about Steve's father, although to be fair, Billy was reluctant to trust pretty much any man in a position of authority. Mr. Jack Harrington had almost been dismissive in the way he had talked with Billy at the time, although he couldn't have cared less. Such put together people like the Harringtons could never have liked a street rat like Billy Hargrove even if their lives would have depended on it.

"I'm fine, Mr. Hayes. How are you, sir?" Mr. Harrington answered, his voice somewhat haughty but still pleasant. He wasn't condescending, his body somewhat relaxed.

"I'm fine, thank you." Mr. Hayes smiled revealing a set of yellow crooked teeth. "I think my Bobby had a meeting with you just the other day."

"Yes, sir, just reminiscing about the good old days." He really didn't seem like a guy doing much of reminiscing with anyone, but Billy bit his tongue.

"True, true." Mr. Hayes nodded. "Do you have issues with your car as well?"

All three of them turned to the black Mercedes that seemed so out of place in front of the shop. It stuck out like a sore thumb. The shiny black color and its brand new tires talked about a well-kept car. In fact that Mercedes looked like it might have had problems when the pigs would fly, not to mention the fact that Harrington would probably rather be dead than take his Mercedes to a small shop like Hammond's.

"No," Harrington replied politely, his lips twisting slightly amused, and looked back at Billy, his dark eyes as impenetrable as a fortress. They weren't promising anything good either. "I came to have a word with Billy here."

"Well, then I'll let you to it." Mr. Hayes clapped Billy's shoulder and smiled wanly. "I'll see you on Monday, my boy. Hopefully with some good news."

"Yes, Mr. Hayes," Billy said and tried to smile at the old man though it must have turned more into a grimace and less into a smile as the old man squeezed him lightly one more time. "Don't forget I'm in only in the afternoon."

"All right, my boy." Mr. Hayes said goodbye to Harrington then left. Billy felt the hair on the back of his head stand up as Harrington just gracefully tilted his head towards the back entrance of the shop and then walked outside expecting Billy to follow. Which he did, though he was far from being happy about it. His hands were shaking as he patted for his smokes and ensured that he still had them. Benny raised an enquiring eyebrow but Billy dismissed him with a slight wave and closed the back door with a silent click.

Mr. Harrington was already smoking what looked rather like a cigarillo, an expensive one at that. He was so out of place there that for a moment Billy felt like laughing. Billy was dressed in that dirty mechanic uniform, his hands cracked and dirty, hair a mess and a suspicious smudge of oil on his right cheek. Looking in the distance, Mr. Harrington was the opposite of Billy: he was dressed in a black thick coat and a blue sweater underneath, attentively pressed slacks and hair carefully combed. There was no smudge, no lint or trace of a crinkle.

Billy hated him on principle.

"My son informed me yesterday evening that he doesn't want to work for me." He had a pleasant voice, slightly hoarse, but sounding like a man expected to be listened to. He took another drag of his cigarillo. "He said that he might never work for me and that he wants to go to college." He glanced at Billy. "Strange how these changes coincide with the beginning of your friendship."

"Are you accusing me of something?" Billy lit up a cigarette as well and watched Harrington defiantly. He was far from being cowered but then again, he didn't want to upset Steve.

"I'm merely stating a fact."

"It doesn't sound like you're fucking stating a fact," Billy snapped because his manners could only stretch so far.

"Maybe it didn't sound like that, but it wasn't an accusation either." Mr. Harrington, though inscrutable as he might be, wasn't an unpleasant guy either. He lacked the same assessing cold stare that his father owned. They spent some time in silence smoking.

"He's not stupid," Billy said at last as he took the last drag of his cigarette before stubbing it to the ground. "You and everyone else treat Steve as if y'all know better what's good for him. Let him do whatever the fuck he wants."

Mr. Harrington took another drag of his cigarillo and stared in front of him. "I am aware of Steve's capabilities in spite of what you might think and I am pleased that he has chosen to go to college, although I have no clue how exactly he is going to survive that experience."

"He's far more resilient than you might think."

"Maybe so." Harrington side-glanced him. "But he's my only son and I want to protect him as much as I can, despite what you might think. I want to give him the best chances in life. What do you think will happen to him in a big city like New York, Chicago or Indianapolis? With his big heart and his less than brilliant way of judging the character of a person?"

Billy swallowed thickly, "Much better than you might think." He cleared his voice before continuing, "In spite of saying that you believe in your son, you sure as hell show little faith in him. You'd rather see him rot in this fucking shithole. Because of what? For the modicum of importance that he'd get because of his fucking name? The small advantages that the name Harrington might buy him?"

"Small advantages as they might be, he'd be respected and cared for," Mr. Harrington said, his ruthless eyes staring back at Billy, this time not shying away from showing just how less than pleased was with the whole conversation. "You are naïve if you think even for a second that this life isn't going to eat you up and spit you out."

"You know nothing about me," Billy hissed in sudden hate. "Absolutely nothing. You don't know the life I had so far or what I had to endure."

"Maybe I don't but I know your type." Mr. Harrington looked at his cigarillo and licked his lips. "You're the type of person that always dreams of escaping from a small town, the special snowflake that sure as hell is going to make it in the big city. Then real life punches you in your goddamn face and you drag all the others down with you. Including innocents who believed in your dream, naively and stupidly."

"You'd think I'd drag down Steve with me?" Billy shook his head in disbelief, fisting his hands on his sides because while he wouldn't punch Steve's dad, he sure as hell felt inclined too. "We haven't even discussed what we're doing after graduation. We didn't even discuss whether he'd come with me or I'd follow him. You fucking rich people sure seem to have seen quite a few soap-operas."

"It may be so." Harrington checked his watch, then added in a dry tone, "But how about you stop being the cliché bad boy and convince my son to stay here in Hawkins, follow in my foot-steps, maybe take some classes to the local community college, if he really wants to learn so much all of a sudden?"

"I'd never fucking do that," Billy snarled. "If he wants to stay on his own volition then he can, but otherwise, I'd never interfere with his wishes. And you're taking your desire to protect him to a fucking low level." He could feel his nails digging into the meat of his palms and he welcomed the stinging pain, if only because he reminded him that he couldn't go around and punch Steve's dad.

"How disappointing," Mr. Harrington said as if bored by the whole conversation and how such a fucking moron gave life to an awesome guy like Steve, Billy couldn't possibly comprehend.

"What-the-fuck-ever." Billy bit his lip hard. "He's a better son than you'll ever deserve."

"And a better... friend, I presume."

"If you're here to tell me that Steve deserves a better friend, then you're wasting your breath. I already fucking know that." Harrington's eyebrows raised in surprise, the first genuine reaction that he had throughout the whole conversation, then something

shrewd glinted in his dark eyes.

“You’re saying that, but I am not sure whether you genuinely believe so.” Mr. Harrington took a few steps forward until Billy could almost taste his expensive cologne. “So let me assure you, Billy, that my son is worth ten of you. He literally couldn’t find a man less deserving of his friendship than you.”

Something terribly agonizing and disgusting clenched at Billy’s chest, Harrington’s words actual poison. He swallowed thickly, biting hard the inside of his cheek, hard enough to draw blood.

“Maybe so,” he mumbled at last, “but you are an even less deserving dad. You’re spending more time away than at home, you’ve never been to any of Steve’s games this year and you literally have no fucking clue what kind of person your own son is. So I find it fucking laughable that you actually have the guts to tell me all this shit.”

Billy watched Mr. Harrington with the distinct impression that the man was definitely not used to be confronted in such a way. However, his ruthlessness appeared to be more engaged into his business rather than his real life as it appeared that Billy’s words made quite an impression on Mr. Harrington, who was the perfect embodiment of shock and disgust simultaneously. And Billy knew that Mr. Harrington could pose a serious threat to much more than his friendship with Steve, but the guy didn’t seem the type to run around and ruin lives – maybe make people feel shitty and terrible, but not actively ruin lives.

“This discussion was definitely not as productive as I might have hoped for.” Harrington stood back and shook his head in real disappointment and Billy almost burst out laughing right then and there because seriously, had Mr. Harrington seen him?

“Yeah, again, I don’t fucking care.”

“Yes, you’ve made this abundantly clear.”

Mr. Harrington put on his dark gloves and watched Billy, his big brown eyes definitely not as kind and as beautiful as his son’s. Yeah, Billy could finally see what Hopper had meant when he said that half

of Hawkins had daddy issues. With a pang, Billy thought about Mr. Sinclair and how supportive he was of Lucas, he thought about Benny and the way he was more of a father to him than Neil Hargrove had ever been, how even Sheriff Hopper was more of a father to the whole rag-tag group. And all this time, Mr. Harrington and Mr. Wheeler were fucking assholes, who didn't know their own fucking sons. And Billy was fucking tired of being grateful that at least they weren't violent like Neil or that Mr. Byers shit.

“Don't let him get hurt, Billy,” Mr. Harrington surprised them both with his sudden wistful tone of voice. “I may not know much my son, but I do know his big heart. Whatever you decide to do after graduation, don't hurt him and don't let him get hurt.”

Mr. Harrington didn't wait for an answer as he made his way back to his car, but something told Billy that he rarely permitted such moments of vulnerability in front of people. Billy swallowed thickly, throat painfully tight – did he just fuck Steve over with this confrontation? He smirked bitterly at the cloudy sky. If Mr. Harrington wanted to keep Steve away from him when he thought that they were just friends, Billy didn't want to imagine what would happen if he found out the truth about the nature of their relationship. He ran his fingers through his hair and pulled hard. For once, he would have loved to have someone to ask for an advice.

He sighed heavily and wiping at his face with one hand, he made his way back in the garage. The roots of those terrible thoughts were growing deeper and stronger.

~O~

The following Monday came dark and quiet, pressing over Billy like a frightful curse. In spite of meeting with Steve at the quarry Saturday night, he hadn't mentioned anything about his discussion with Mr. Harrington. However, he had agonized over it the entire weekend. And it didn't help that the first thing he saw in the school parking lot had been Steve and Nancy laughing at something. Billy literally froze when he saw Steve pushing a little strand of her hair gently behind her ear and Nancy smiled shyly at him. That little gesture more than anything else poisoned everything and broke him. And not even the beautiful smile that curled on Steve's lips when he finally saw Billy

could warm his heart.

The whole day passed in a blur and Billy waved quickly at Steve as he got into the car and went to pick up Max. Billy changed the station a few times before switching to his beloved cassettes but even Metallica couldn't help him so he cut off all the music and paid attention to his driving. It was difficult for Billy to keep on believing in Steve's touches, in the way he'd look at Billy with those dark beautiful eyes as if Billy were something precious, something worthy of worship. Whether because he doubted Steve's sincerity or his own worthiness, Billy didn't know anymore.

"Are you going to do something stupid?" Max asked as she glanced at him, startling him out of his revelry. "You're never this quiet unless you're about to do something stupid."

"Define stupid," he tossed back a little defiantly and picked up a cigarette. He lit it up then opened his window a little.

"I don't know, the whole range is huge. You could technically do anything and I still would consider it stupid."

"That's nice, Max." He took a long drag and tried to concentrate on his driving. He squirmed a few times in his seat, trying to come up with a better position. He even scratched absent-mindedly at his forehead with his thumb. Yet, still, he wouldn't add anything else. Which in turn worried Max even more. She bit her lip hard, even opening her mouth a few times as if undecided about what she should say next.

"You can talk to me if you want," she settled on in the end.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Mad Max."

"Why?"

"Because you'd try to make me change my mind and I can't. Not when it comes to this."

"So then you admit that you're planning on doing something stupid." Her reproachful tone didn't help exactly calming him down and he wished he'd have kept his fucking mouth shut.

"Max, can we fucking not talk about it?" He pressed his lips against the cigarette so he could run his fingers through his hair. "I had enough of talking these past few days to last me a fucking lifetime and I'm not in the mood to be told by yet another person how I am undeserving of some bullshit or other and that I take the wrong decisions every fucking single time anyway."

"Billy, I'd never say that, you know this," she said her tone a little mortified.

"Maybe not in so many words but it seems that in the last few weeks everyone seems to be fucking standing on the fucking higher moral ground when it comes to me and I'm not in the mood for being told that what I've been thinking in the past few days and what I've decided is fucking stupid or wrong."

"But what if it is stupid or wrong?"

"It wouldn't fucking matter! It's my own fucking decision!" Billy snapped. "It's like everybody all of a sudden decided that I'm not good at taking my own fucking decisions." She didn't flinch, but Max couldn't hide her displeasure at hearing him raising his voice. "Sorry," he mumbled and flicked the half-smoked cigarette out of the window. He let the silence wrap around them like a goddamn shroud, choking the words out of him.

"Sometimes you aren't taking the best decisions when it comes to your own person." Max looked straight ahead when Billy dared to glance at her, a deep frown marring her beautiful face. "Just don't hurt yourself. You seem to be good at that."

"You sound so fucking old sometimes, Mad Max."

"Would you tell me afterward?" She stared back at him. "Would you tell me if there's anything I could do to help?"

"I would."

They didn't say anything else and as soon as she stepped out of the car, he started the engine again and drove off. In spite of taking the fucking decision, it hurt Billy even to think about the reality that it

would bring. As long as he didn't say it out loud, it didn't exist.

But the dreadful thought of breaking up with Steve was like a sore tooth that he couldn't stop probing with his tongue. He held the steering wheel in a tight white-knuckled grip, trying to think about the way he should do it. The memories of Steve kept derailing his train of thought. He remembered the naked affection in those beautiful eyes, he remembered the way he had been touched and kissed and caressed. The way he had been consoled and had been worshipped.

Nevertheless, he also remembered the way he hadn't been able to control that night at the Byers' place, all the terrible things he had told Steve along the way, all the nasty little comments and all the snide remarks and how many times he had tried to make him leave. He had remembered the way Max had mentioned that Steve only liked girls before, how everyone in his goddamn life told him in one way or other that Steve was far better than he deserved.

Billy parked the Camaro in front of the garage and took a deep breath. He'd do it. The image of Steve gently pushing that strand of hair behind Nancy's ear still played in his mind. He was taking that from Steve, the possibility of having something better, the possibility of having something normal, of not having to hide. Billy fisted his hands and pressed them into his eyes as he leaned forward against the steering wheel. He'd have to do it. What could Billy offer him? That tiny apartment that he kept dreaming off? Instead of the likes of the Harrington house with its own pool and God knew how many bedrooms?

Billy leaned back again and let his hands fall in his lap. He'd do it the next time he'd see Steve. The quicker, the better. He straightened himself, got out of the car and walked in the garage.

But he wasn't remotely ready when a couple of hours later while he was about to take a smoking break, he saw Steve walking inside the garage and smiling at Billy from across the room.

"Why are you here?" Billy asked as soon as they were outside at the back of the garage. His hands shook bad enough to take him a few tries to light up his cigarette. "Something happened?"

"Nope, I just dropped Dustin at the arcade and I wanted to see what you were up to since I was around the area." Steve shrugged shyly and followed Billy as they took a walk around the junkyard, although it was quite late in the afternoon and the light was all fuzzy around them. The idea of saying those words terrified Billy. The simple thought of not having this ever again was enough to bring a sharp pain inside his chest and he almost doubled over in pain. Maybe he was wrong, maybe if he could wait for -

"Harrington, I don't think we should see each other anymore," Billy heard himself saying at the sky, at the rusty cars, even at the barren trees surrounding them, and Steve's sharp intake of breath was the only sign that he heard him. The words had flown his mouth almost at their own volition, piercing any intimacy that they had ever shared. Billy took a long drag and didn't look at Steve. The seconds trickled by like thick molasses, asphyxiating him with each drop.

"Nah," came the response in the end and it was so fucking unexpected that Billy turned sharply at Steve, almost giving himself a whiplash, "but thanks for offering."

"Nah?" He repeated, eyebrows almost reaching his hairline, mouth slightly slack. "What the fuck, Harrington?"

"Nah, I don't think it's a good idea," Steve said, standing his ground, seemingly bored with the conversation. "Nah, I'd rather continue seeing you. Nah, we can't *not* see each other, moron, because we both go to the same high school. Or nah, I think I'll stick with you. But again, thank you for the offering."

"I'm trying to break up with you and you just say *nah*?" Billy worked himself up, his voice loud and angry. He licked his lips a few times, flicking the cigarette on the ground. "How come you get to fucking decide that?"

"And how come you get to break up with me out of the blue?" Steve stepped right into his space, uncaring of who might see them, barely holding himself together, "Because I fucking know you, Hargrove. Something happened. You can't be crazy about me in the morning then late in the evening decide that we'd better break up. Now," he hissed, eyes bright and searing, "you're either going to tell me what

the fuck happened or shut the fuck up with your bullshit ideas.”

“I need you to take this seriously, Harrington.”

“I don't know what you're talking about, Hargrove,” Steve's voice was hard like granite and twice as brutal. “I've been taking this thing seriously. It's you apparently that doesn't take things seriously. I'm not the one trying to fucking break up with you.”

“Don't you fucking get it, Harrington?” Billy sneered. Viciously grabbing the other boy by his coat, he slammed him hard against a rusty car, the soundless crack echoing in his fucking mind. “I'm doing this for your own good.”

“Oh, yeah, generous Billy Hargrove.” Steve's voice was searingly mocking. “Yeah, how about we stop pretending that this is all about me when in reality it's all about you? You're a fucking coward! Don't give me this fucking bullshit about *it's not me, it's you* because I've already been through this once before and I'm really not in the fucking mood.” Steve's fingers curled around his shoulders and dug deep into his meat, pulling him closer, eyes blazing with impossible fury. “Tell me that I was just a piece of fucking ass for you. That should settle the matter.”

“You were just a piece of ass for me,” Billy growled, slamming Steve against the rusty metal a few times. “I had you just because you were convenient.” It was so simple to reverse to those poisonous words that Billy wondered for one fleeting moment if he had ever changed in the first place. Because he could still hurt people so bad – Steve's big and beautiful eyes were full of unshed tears and they were about to boil Billy alive.

“And you were just a warmth mouth for me,” Steve counter-attacked, the words so unexpected that for a moment they left Billy breathless. “This is what I am supposed to say in this little scenario that you've made, right? That you were better than my right hand but more of a hassle too.” Steve stood his ground and planted his fucking feet as if ready for a fight. “That you're just a faggot and that I don't care about you.”

The words tore him open. Billy had expected a clean cut, he had

expected Steve to say thanks for the sex and move the fuck on in spite of the contrary evidence. But here was the thing: in every scenario that he had created, Steve had never counter-attacked using Billy's exact words, therefore, the sudden pain that the words had created lanced through his chest like he had been physically punched in the gut and he actually heaved before doubling over with the force of it. His fingers convulsed in Steve's coat and he had to take several deep breaths to calm himself and when he finally dared to look back at Steve, the beautiful eyes had spilled their load, tears falling silently on his cheeks.

"Sometimes you bring out the worst in me," Steve muttered harshly in the silence of the junkyard. "It's like you want me to be mean to you and I keep giving you what you want. Like now. And it doesn't matter that you're flaying me open as long as you get what you want."

"You think you're the one torn apart?" Billy shook his head roughly. "You're the first man that's ever touched me here." He took a hand and fisting it, he smashed it against his chest where his heart should be. The deep and dry sound was jarring. "The fucking first! You didn't even touch a man before me. How the fuck should I know that you're not still pinning over that Wheeler bitch? Or that you're just getting your rocks off until something better comes along?"

"Is this what you fucking think of me? That I am such a fucking liar and a cheat?" Harrington snarled and he pushed against the hold. "Then let me ask you, Hargrove," he pressed the name as if it were a swear word, "how the fuck should I know that you're not just taking your rocks off until someone better shows up too? How should I know that I'm not just a name on a list of boys with whom you screwed around?" Harrington breathed hard, each sharp intake of breath echoing between the two of them. He settled his open hands against Billy's fisted ones. "Look at me! Look at us! You're the only man that's ever touched me too. In more ways than fucking one. Do you think this is easy for me? Do you think I feel adequate all the time? That I don't feel stupid at times because I have no fucking clue what I'm doing?"

"You shouldn't," Billy mumbled and he eased his hold, this time pulling Steve closer to his body. "You're too fucking nice, Steve. And

you scare the shit out of me. You terrify me.”

“I scare the shit out of you?” Harrington burst into a deprecating chuckle. “You’ve got it wrong. You scare the crap out of me, Hargrove.” He moved his hands in a gentle caress over Billy’s shoulders this time and pulled him gently closer too. He leaned forward until he could rest his forehead against Billy’s and that simple gesture was more intimate than a thousand kisses and blow-jobs for Billy. “I don’t know what you want from me, Billy. Not if you don’t use your fucking words and stop coming with this fucking breaking up bullshit. Because even if I don’t know much, I know enough to understand that I’m in this for the long haul. I know I haven’t decided which college I should pray to be accepted to because I still don’t know where you want to go after graduation.”

They breathed hard against each other’s lips and Billy couldn’t think. He couldn’t understand why this boy kept on fighting for him long after the battle had seemed to be over. What did he do to deserve such a brave man like Steve?

“I want to be with you,” Billy confessed breathlessly and fervently like a prayer in the darkness with no hope of receiving an answer, hands clutching tighter at the man in front of him hoping it would be fucking enough. *Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.* He couldn’t do it. “I want to be with you,” he prayed. “*I want to be with you.*”

“Then fucking be with me.” Steve leaned his forehead against his, before nuzzling at his cheek.

“I’m scared,” Billy admitted in that beloved skin, an ephemeral whisper that only Steve could have heard. He could admit to the truth, he could confess that if only Steve could hear him. The intimacy of their embrace was overwhelming.

“Why?” Steve rubbed against his cheek, but not raising his head, giving him the intimacy of a confessional of made of beloved skin and bones, sinews that he had tasted time and time again. It was overwhelming to think so highly of a person.

“That I don’t deserve you? That I’m ruining your life? That you could do so much better than me? That one day you’ll wake up and say

you've had enough of this? Take your pick. I got more."

"This deserving shit is so much bullshit." Steve's words crashed into his skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. His long eyelashes fluttered over his cold skin and Billy felt owned by the moment. "I'm not a fucking prize, Billy, to be earned or deserved. You could be the one to decide one day that you've had enough of my incompetent ass when you see that I'm not good at much of anything. Why am I so deserving of you? Because of all the moments that had happened before? Because I'm the better person? Who the fuck gets to decide such things? This is something completely new for the both of us. And yes, sometimes I am frightened too, but never by what I feel for you."

"You should, Steve. Run as fast as you can, as far as you can. Keep yourself away from me."

"There was never a moment that you couldn't ruin, was there?" Billy could feel Steve's smile, a thing of beauty. "Sometimes all I want is you by my side, playing basketball or talking about music or listening to you rant about Han Solo. But other times I just want to hear you breathe in the darkness of my room and listen to your heart beating just for me." Steve's chuckle was wet and painful to listen. "So this? What we have between us right now? It's enough for me. Shouldn't be enough for you? Without all this crap about ruining lives and deserving people."

"Fuck, when did you get so wise?" Billy said and pressed his cold nose against Steve's collarbone, inhaling sharp and deep. The familiar scent was heady.

"Mostly since I started babysitting a whole pack of thirteen-year-olds." Steve chuckled. "So don't make me sic them on you. You might regret it."

"That's actually a terrifying and effective threat." Billy raised his head and smiled softly at the other young man, their cheeks wet, their smiles brittle but true flooding their eyes with absolute emotion. Steve's stupidly kind eyes were beautiful and his full lips sinfully plump. There were no words left to describe the elation that Billy felt at that particular moment knowing that he could have Steve for as

long as the other boy wanted him too.

“No more bullshit about breaking up?” Steve went for brash and funny but came out a little insecure and Billy couldn't have that. He cupped his cheeks, thumbs wiping softly at the wet trails of the tears. He made sure he stared right into Steve's eyes when he said defiantly,

“God help you, Harrington, I'll keep the hell out of you.”

“You'd better, Hargrove.”

He didn't say *I love you*.

He didn't say *This is for the long haul for the both of us*.

He didn't say *You've touched me in impossible ways*.

Those words could never encompass what Billy felt at that particular moment.

Instead, he took in that beautiful boy that managed to break walls upon walls. Instead, he breathed him in and Billy thanked whoever was out there for Steve Harrington. Aware of his surroundings, Billy still managed to look quickly around before diving and kissing the hell out of Steve Harrington, heart hammering wildly against his chest, sweet relief pouring through his veins. And when they broke up for air, they still leaned against each other, hands unable to let go, lips still hungry enough to dive for little kisses, tiny presses of gentle heat.

Billy Hargrove had never known such gentleness before he met Steve Harrington. He had the strong suspicion that he would never need to look again for it.

“You need to get back to work,” Steve mumbled as he kissed him one more time then let go.

Billy whined like a five-year-old without his favorite candy, “Do I have to?”

“You kind of do.”

There had never been four words in Billy's life to horrify him as much as those little words did. He completely blanched as he could feel Steve literally shaking, eyes wide and frightened as he stared over Billy's shoulder.

Billy swung around only to be faced with giant Benny Hammond, stomach plummeting. He took a step sideways to make sure he stood between Benny and Steve. He planted his feet and jutted his chin. He'd get to protect Steve from this.

Notes for the Chapter:

Edit: If you reached this point, I think you're long overdue for a break. Get up, drink some water, walk around. The story will be waiting for you when you're coming back. (21/10/18)

Thank you [lambchop33](#) for the beta. You're so nice and I really appreciate it. All the mistakes left are mine and mine alone. Also, apologies for the awkward smut scene – I'm terrible at writing smut but the scene wouldn't leave my mind so I had to write it down. You're free to laugh at it if you want. I know I did, then I promptly hit my head against the desk. Repeatedly.

Some technical issues now: this is actually part one of the last chapter, which has officially reached 30k. Because it turned out so huge, I decided to split it into two parts and publish the first so that you guys can get an update. Hopefully, within the next few days, you will get the second part and the epilogue. I'm sorry for the delay, my lovelies, but sometimes real life does get in the way of just about everything. :(Also, I am going to change the rating to this story as officially E for explicit.

Trivia time:

The models of the cars are real and all pre-date 1985. Also, I'd like to add that actually this one was really

fun to research.

Music: Motorhead - *The Hammer* (1980) and Metallica - *Kill 'Em All* (1983).

Movies: *Riders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom* (1984)

Tommy appears on the IMDB page of *Stranger Things* as Tommy H. and it was honestly too funny to add a surname for him.

And if you made this far, thank you for reading. I mean it. :)

6. Saint Christopher - Part Two

Summary for the Chapter:

In order to gain something, you must lose something.
Or no pain, no gain.

Notes for the Chapter:

Saint Christopher is the patron saint of travelers, drivers, bookbinders, and surfers. Yes, quite an eclectic group. :)

Buckle up for one last bumpy ride. :)

When Billy realized for the very first time - deep in the recess of his mind - that he was attracted to boys, it made him sick to his stomach.

Not because of Dante, who was the most beautiful boy he had ever seen with his shiny dark hair and his olive skin, with his gravelly voice and calloused hands. They were both smart and they both attended AP classes. Billy was extremely popular – he had built a thick skin, an armor conquered in a million battles lost or won. His persona was larger than life and he applied himself to just about everything as long as it kept him away from his own house. Dante was popular for a different reason – he had leader-abilities, could command respect without even raising his voice or using his larger than life shoulders. Dante's dad was in the military and made him wear his hair short but, other than that, Dante was able to come and go as he pleased as long as he didn't get into trouble. He had three more sisters and he played the doting brother role well – the bastard wasn't even faking it.

The first time Dante had kissed Billy, the dark sky hung like a dome lit up with stars, the sound of the waves crashing on the shore surrounding them. They had too much to drink, courtesy of one of the seniors, their limbs mellow and brushing each time they talked about the things they liked or the movies they'd seen. Billy had bitten his bottom lip for so long that it was slightly swollen and red – it was a poor attempt to kill the desire that had sparked to life hot and

heavy inside his belly. Dante was at least one head taller than him, wider than him – so much different than Steve now – but still just as capable, just as kind. The campfire was simmering in the distance and the music blaring from the small speakers could barely be heard. Dante checked their surroundings. Hidden by a boulder, one could catch only a glimpse of their legs.

Billy could still remember his sharp intake of breath, his trembling hands as one fisted in the sand and the other hovered awkwardly before settling on Dante's chest. It was no more than a press of lips, salty and tasting of beer, but it had exploded on Billy's lips with a heady power that left him dizzy and breathless. Dante had leaned back a little and smiled secretly. *I had wanted to do that for a long time*, he had muttered between crashing waves and Billy's hand trembled hard on his chest. *I wish I had known that you weren't going to punch me before. I'd have kissed you a million times over.* Billy had been too afraid to say anything else, so he had let himself fall into a thousand more little kisses behind that boulder as he had grabbed a fistful of Dante's shirt and had held on and on and on.

Dante had moved schools three weeks later as his father had been reassigned. It had been the first genuine heartbreak that Billy had experienced since his mom had died. Nonetheless, just as sharp was the memory of him looking in the mirror at himself, his kissed lips raw and swollen, the way he was hit suddenly by the harsh reality that if his father were to ever find out the truth about him, Neil Hargrove would actually be capable of murder. Nothing made him sicker to his stomach than the thought that his own flesh and blood – the one person in the whole wide world that supposedly loved him unconditionally – could kill him for liking boys.

Being attracted to boys was going to remain his darkest secret, plunged deep into the back of his mind and as far away as humanly possible from his dad. Until Rob, there would be just fooling around in back alleys and clubs where he wasn't supposed to be in, never going too far, never pushing it, always in the fringes of the groups. It was excruciating and at times Billy had hated that part of himself with the power of a thousand suns.

Later on, when the truth exploded in his face with broken bones and tears and moving at the end of the world where there was little left

for him, Billy thought that being gay would never cost him something vital again.

That was up until that moment when he stood between Steve Harrington and Benny Hammond and wished the ground would open up and swallow him and Steve together, protecting them from the cruelty of other people. How many times was he going to lose everything that mattered before he would lose his goddamn mind? He had already almost lost Steve that afternoon and now just a moment of madness was going to cost him his friendship with Benny.

“Close the door,” Benny said curtly, stepping into his office and taking a seat at his desk. It still smelled of oil and cigarettes and that coffee that Benny spilled that morning, scalding his hands and swearing so loud all the Main Street must have heard him. Billy nodded and closed the door with a trembling hand, noticing that Lennie was watching them closely from a distance. If Billy could tilt his head just so, he could also see the boot of the Beemer in front of the garage and took strength from the sight alone. “Have a seat,” Benny added but the invitation didn't sound particularly friendly so Billy shook his head.

“I'd rather stand for this if you don't mind.” Billy swallowed thickly, a deep pit inside of his stomach the size of a black hole and twice as void. In the darkest corners of his mind, he had always assumed that once Benny Hammond found out the truth about Billy, their relationship would disintegrate, but he'd never thought that the moment of truth would come so precipitously and painfully out of the blue. That this would be the way everything would break loose and fall apart.

He fisted his hands and pressed them tight against his thighs. “I'll leave. I'll tell the sheriff that it didn't work out after all.” His words seemed to miss their own footing. Billy looked down and away, the humiliation burning hot and bitter through his gut. “I'll tell whatever you want me to tell. Hell, you can even break my fucking neck if you want but please – just please – don't tell anything about Steve.”

“What the fuck?” Hammond's astonishment colored his voice.

“Please, Benny, just don't!” Billy could feel his eyes stinging with

unshed tears, but he kept his head bowed and watched from a corner of his eye the fucking Beemer. It gave him strength – Steve didn't leave, the fucking moron, but fuck, Billy was thankful for it. "Please, Steve has no fault in this. It's all on me. Do whatever the fuck you want with me, but please don't hurt Steve." Throat tight, Billy could barely breathe, the last words coming out harsh and unbidden.

Please, let me come with you, Steve had pleaded as they had made their way through the junkyard, following Benny's giant stature like a pair of lost hobbits would probably follow Aragorn or Gandalf – though there was definitely no sense of adventure, but rather of doom. However, even then, Billy had just shaken his head and had begged Steve to go – how everything could be so terribly mirrored again?

Billy could almost taste the salty breeze back then in California when Rob had squeezed his hand and had kissed the hell out of him, all for his father to catch the both of them – bad luck had meant Neil Hargrove taking the afternoon off without mentioning anything to his son. Billy had thought even then that it had all been too much premeditated on his father's part. He had also told Rob back then to leave, and later, while the doctors had tried to figure out a less painful way to put the bones in his forearm back to their natural state, Billy had been glad. Rob had been just a fling, but he had had more soul in his little finger than Neil Hargrove in his whole body and the entire experience would have broken him. The way it would have broken Steve, had he stayed here too.

Every single time someone found out about his attraction to boys, Billy felt like standing at the edge of a cliff about to be pushed into the darkest abyss. And apart from Max and the boys with which he had been fooling around, he'd always been pushed hard, broken and smashed, left in pieces.

"Billy, please sit down," Benny's voice sounded awfully pleading for a guy that was about to kick his ass so Billy dared to raise his eyes only to be met with Hammond's kind eyes. As a matter of fact, Benny looked exhausted and somewhat horrified and not much inclined towards pushing Billy off a cliff so Billy decided to follow his gut and accept the invitation, legs suddenly shaky and weak. Billy crashed into the seat and twined his fingers together, expecting the worst was

still about to come.

"I want to tell you a story," Benny said after a while, breaking the tense and awkward silence.

"I already know all about the burning in hell stuff, thanks," Billy couldn't help but sneer. "Don't need a fucking recap! In fact, I know all about the burning in hell, the way I'm not fucking normal, and the way I'm a stain on this goddamn earth. Seriously, man, just go on with the fucking beating the shit out of me. At least that's the norm and I fucking get it."

"I'm not fucking going to beat the shit out of you, Billy. Or Steve, for that matter. Jesus Christ!" Benny crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "I've killed people – in the war, true – but it still makes me a fucking murderer. I really think that I can skip the religious part as well since most likely both of us will burn in hell. The standards are so high we might as well burn all in hell. Can I just go on with my story instead? I promise it's a short one."

"Okay." The confusion ran deep within his bones but he kept his mouth shut for once.

"It took about six months to convince Tamara to go out with me. She's not the easiest woman to woo, but in spite of the vibe that I was getting from her, that any flirting on my part would be welcomed, she seemed reticent to say yes. Anyway, one day she comes by the garage and asks to have a word with me." Benny scratched his beard a few times before following with, "She says she has a brother that she loves very much – I vaguely remembered him from high school. Jared was from my generation but we didn't talk much and then right after graduation, I joined the army and he left for college, so we lost contact completely." Benny watched intently Billy as he continued, "So, anyway, Tamara tells me about this brother of hers and how much she loves him and that she can't be with someone that might hate her brother for who he is because she'd always choose her brother over any other man. See where I'm going with this?"

"Tamara's brother is gay," Billy's hoarse voice sounded void and adrift in the small office, but his tongue could barely move in his all too dry mouth.

“Yes, he's been living in New York for the past three years with his partner and we always visit them in the summer.” A slight curl of the lips bloomed on Benny's lips. “So I'll tell you what I told Tamara back then: that I learned that all life is too precious and too fucking short to care about who anyone loves. That love is so difficult to find that the gender of that person shouldn't matter to anyone.” Benny leaned forward and put his arms on his dingy desk and smiled this time for real, “But I sure as hell want to ask that boy about his intentions – he's not getting away that easy.”

Billy looked down at his white-knuckled hands, fisted into his lap, then back up at Benny. It took him several moments to realize the meaning of Benny's little story. It took him, even more, to comprehend that he didn't only have Benny's acceptance, but Tamara's as well. Some terrible emotional crawled inside his chest, a weight that dispersed like the mist under the rays of the sun. Billy blinked several times to clear his vision, then he hissed, “Get up asshole!”

“What for?”

“Because I can't fucking hug you, genius, if you're sitting down. Just think about how weird it would fucking look if I were to sit in your lap. It would scar Lennie for life.”

“Uhm, who fucking cares?” Benny grinned wide at him. Still, they both got up and Benny went around the desk just so they could hug the hell out of each other. Billy squeezed the shit out of him burying his face in the man's shoulder because he didn't have the words to explain how much his acceptance meant for him, how much he was afraid that it was all a fucking dream, that he'd wake up tomorrow with no fucking boyfriend and no father-figure, alone in his anger and hatred of his father, on his own path to destruction.

They patted each other on the back before letting each other go and grinning at each other like fucking lunatics. Benny tilted his head and looked outside. Billy followed his eyes only to see this time Steve leaning against the boot of the Beemer and smiling tentatively. Billy showed him the thumbs up.

Steve's smile was a miracle in itself.

Billy was exhausted as he leaned against the door for a minute and took off his work boots. He massaged his left shoulder a few times, the wet weather and the recent dislocation not agreeing with each other lately. He could hear the empty clings and clangs of silverware hitting or scraping against plates and he sighed. He missed the dinner time again, not that they actually waited on him. He could hear Susan's soft chuckle and Neil's murmurs and he disliked the idea of entering that room where he hadn't been welcomed in so long. Not tonight when he was so exhausted and everything hurt, especially his hands and back. All he wanted was to take a shower and fall asleep in that order and he really didn't feel like socializing with this family.

He braced himself as he entered the kitchen. Max raised her head almost instantly, a hyper-aware rabbit if he ever saw one. Susan smiled wanly at him while Neil didn't even throw him a glance. They were playing the all American fucking family and there was no room for him. There wasn't even a fucking plate at the table and Billy resented his father and Susan in that moment so much that he could barely breathe. It was common decency that they lacked when dealing with him.

"Good evening everyone," he greeted and he made his way to the cupboard and pulled out a plate to the soft answering greetings of Max and Susan. He washed his hands at the kitchen sink and then came back to the table.

If it were up to him, he wouldn't even have said anything, maybe just stomp to his room and pretend that it wasn't just another shitty dinner in a family that no longer had a fucking place for him. Billy felt brittle as if the slightest breeze could knock him down. It had been a terrible week at the autoshop, the school had been even worse with additional essays and tests (to prepare them for college when in reality less than half of the students could afford to attend one), and Billy just wanted to rest. Instead, he sat down at the fucking table and put some food on his plate and pretended he didn't just want to flip the fuck out.

"Sorry I'm late," he mumbled as he sat by his father's side – God forbid he ever dared to change his place. "I needed to finish the

Mustang for Mr. Chobam and Mrs. Schuster didn't want to leave until her oil was changed."

"No one is interested in your poor excuses," his father's voice sounded so blank that it actually frightened Billy more than if he would have shouted at him. He looked at his plate then looked back at his dad. Neil raised his icy blue eyes and pinned him down. "In fact, you can grab your stuff and leave. You're no longer welcome in this house."

The whole thing was so random, the lack of warning so profound that for a moment Billy watched his father without actually comprehending what he was being told, fork frozen half-way to his mouth.

"What?"

"You heard me well." Neil chewed mechanically, almost inhuman in his detachment. "I want you and your stuff out of my house tonight."

"Neil-" Susan tried to intervene but one look from Neil was enough to silence her. She bowed her head and took another bite.

Billy didn't spare a glance at her. From the corner of his eye, he could see Max with her beautiful blue eyes widened in horror and shock, food long forgotten. But Billy could only focus on his father, the absurdity of the situation suddenly too much to bear. Out of all the fucked up scenarios in which his father could have thrown him out of the house, this insignificant dinner on a random Thursday evening was by far the least possible scenario. In fact, it was so fucking illogical that out of the blue, Billy burst out laughing.

Neil's reaction was quick and unequivocal in its scope of producing as much pain as possible. Billy recoiled under the whip pressure of the back-handed slap and his lower lip burst almost immediately, a slow drip of blood staining his chin. Max actually gasped in shock and Susan gaped like a stupid fucking fish because Neil had never been so fucking violent while both of them present. For once, the slap had drained all the sound and life out of the room and Billy was petty in his gladness that for once he wasn't the only one who was fucking tainted by his father's random explosions of violence.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Billy's laughter only got louder, a slight hysterical tinge to it, although he rubbed at the right side of the jaw with his hand, trying to alleviate the pain in vain.

“Watch your mouth, boy,” Neil hissed and his eyes blazed with icy fury. “You will show me some respect while you're under my roof.”

“Respect?” Billy's anger darkened his face, blood rushing to his ears, drowning even Max's protest sounds. He narrowed his eyes at his father, his lips a thin line of pure fury. “You don't deserve any fucking respect. You're throwing out your own son!”

“I think I've done more than what's necessary for you,” Neil said, eyes flashing and baring his teeth. “I'm not throwing you out, I'm giving you what you've always wanted.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Billy repeated and wiped the blood from his busted lip. He watched in disgust as his father continued to eat his dinner without even deeming it necessary to give Billy a fucking explanation. Anger exploded in such an overwhelming wave that without even thinking, Billy picked up his plate and slammed it against the adjacent wall. The food splashed like a twisted Rorschach test. It was an offensive gesture, enough to command his father's focus on him. “You can't even fucking wait until I am eighteen? You're just throwing me out? Just like that?” His question was knife-edged and wet, yet Neil Hargrove just watched him, clenched jaw and squinting eyes. It made him uglier, meaner and just plain horrible.

“I don't need no disrespecting faggots in my house,” Neil hissed in retaliation but the sentiment of the argument was weak even to his ears. Something else must have happened to make Neil Hargrove act like a fucking dumb shit.

Billy wondered for a moment how it was possible to hate the fucking man that was eating his goddamn dinner so fucking placidly. How he could be so hurt by Neil's words and random actions that had gotten the both of them in this moment and in this place of no return. It felt like his entire blood had rushed to his ears, pounding against its frail temples, his brain going on override and demanding a fucking explanation.

"I don't care, I have somewhere to go," Billy sneered at last, hands balled into fists. He was so frightened in that moment that he might actually hit his dad, that all his anger and frustration that had built up over the years would finally press against him like a cresting wave, smashing everything in return.

"They won't want you there once they find out you're a fucking faggot." Something flashed again in his father, something that was terribly akin to uncertainty.

"They actually know," Billy sneered and he hated the way his voice trembled, and he hated the way he felt like a fucking stupid child. "Sheriff Hopper knows, Benny and Tamara know, Max knows, a few more people know. In fact, even fucking Susan here knows. And I am not her child and she could have treated me worse than she did, but at least she was way better than you ever were. Everyone fucking knows and yet no one seems to have a problem with it, except you." Billy slammed the hand on the table, shocking the hell out of his father. "If I am a piece of shit son, then you're a fucking piece of shit father. You made me. *You!* You think you hate me?" Billy wiped the snot and the blood and the tears with the back of his hand. "Well, I fucking hate you more. Take your fucking hate and multiply it to infinity and that's how much I hate you." Billy barred his teeth into a gruesome smile. "But one day," he sneered leaning forward, right into his father's face, "one day all this hate will be gone, one day you will be just a fucking nightmare for me, not even that. And I live for that day." He stood up and watched his father as the pathetic man that he had always been, as the terrible excuse of a human being that had to prove he was better than his son. "In the meantime, hurt Max or Susan and I promise you'll get a taste of your own fucking medicine."

"Get out!" Neil Hargrove stammered, choked by fury and by the tight ball of plain meanness that he had in him. "Get out of my goddamn house!"

"Fucking gladly!" Billy spit on him with all the poison that was left inside of him all this time. He stood up and the force of it alone made the chair smash to the floor. And for the first time, something akin to fear flashed behind Neil's icy eyes.

“Billy,” Max said, voice wet and eyes glistening.

“It's fine, Max, really.” He tried to smile comforting at her, but couldn't do it. Susan didn't even dare to raise her eyes – fuck, she was so fucking stupid if she thought that she wasn't going to be next on Neil's list. “I'll come and pick up my things tomorrow,” he said to his father but not actually looking at him.”

“You'll only take things for which you paid,” Neil hissed like the poisonous snake that he was. Nothing more. The cassette recorder stays here, the furniture stays here. All your weights and all your other junk can disappear with you. And I want you to leave the house keys when you leave.”

“Relax, I wouldn't take your fucking junk even if someone would pay me for it,” Billy replied, ignoring the pain that clenched at his chest like a fucking carnivore plant. He went around the table, kissed Max on her head, promising her that he'd see her soon. Then looked back at Neil one last time, this good for nothing man that had poisoned his life so much, that had beaten on him and threatened him and cut his hair, attacking him in the night. “You were never much of a fucking father to me, but at least be fucking one for Max. She deserves at the very least that after you brought us into this hell hole.” His words came out jagged and painful to hear and Billy realized that if he stayed in that kitchen one more second, he would either punch his father or simply go and off himself and he didn't want to do any of these.

Neil Hargrove didn't look up. He began eating again like Billy was just an annoying fly. Billy watched his father in silence, sharp intakes of breath punching through his chest. For once, Neil Hargrove looked the part of the petty and terrible person that he truly was. Shoulders hunched, mechanical gestures, icy stare – an unfeeling robot if Billy ever saw one.

Billy Hargrove got out of the kitchen and pulling on his work boots again, he got out of the house, slamming the door with a satisfied grimace on his face.

It would be the last time that he'd see Neil Hargrove alive.

He got into the Camaro and took a deep breath. The pain of being sent away by his own father, the pain of never being loved by his own flesh and blood lanced through his chest like he had been punched in the solar plexus and he doubled over the steering wheel, trying to calm himself enough to be able to start the engine and fucking drive away from that cursed house as fast as he could.

He took a few shaky breaths but he no longer seemed to have enough tears to shed. He started the engine and reversed so fast that the tire burn reached him even through the closed windows. Rigid like a statue, he held on the steering wheel white-knuckled and hard. He knew where he was going – he just wanted to do something first.

Pure fury hummed under his skin like a wire of high electrical pressure. When Billy was eight, they all went to visit San Diego. Neil had told them that he had a friend from back home that owned a small bungalow there and that they could stay there for a few days. They had left for San Diego on a Thursday morning. Neil had taken time off from work just for this. They had packed a few clothes and some food for the journey and they had driven in Neil's truck all the way to San Diego, listening to his father's cassettes and his mum's chuckled stories. Neil hadn't complained about the traffic or the heat or the noise that Billy had been making, constantly oohing and wowing as if he had never seen California before. What Billy remembered vividly though was the way his father had looked in the rearview mirror throughout the journey and had smiled at him each time. How he had seemed at peace in a way that had been surprising, even for an eight-year-old child, to notice.

Neil Hargrove had held willingly his wife's hand and that of his child. They'd walked down the beach, they'd wasted a day at the aquarium, they'd eaten ice-cream until they had been sick (well, Billy had been but Neil hadn't yelled at him or made a goddamn snide remark). His mom had smiled and smiled and smiled. Billy didn't remember any other beautiful moment in his life related to his father, but he could still taste the salty air of the San Diego walks and the sun that had made his hair lighter and lighter and that had melted away the iciness in Neil's eyes.

They had played on the beach while mom had read a book, casting her beautiful eyes at them every once in a while when Billy had

screamed her name enthusiastically or when Neil was laughing out loud. Neil had been laughing freely and it had been glorious to see. His dad, such a serious man, so mean at times, had finally laughed out loud. It had made mom giddy with happiness and it had made Billy dizzy with relief – his father did love him only maybe he didn't know how to show it.

They had spent five days in San Diego, the happiest days in Billy's life. There would be no more days like that in the years after. The ghost of who they really were had caught up with them soon enough. A month later his mom had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

It was a losing battle after that.

When they first moved to Hawkins, Billy drove every single night to the limit of the city where the rusty goodbye sign rested, almost invisible to those who weren't aware of its existence. Even outside of Hawkins the trees at times appeared to be hungry and swallow up all forms and signs of civilization, quicker than the man could rebuild them. Even in daylight, there had always been something peculiar and somewhat ominous when it came to the woods in Hawkins. But in the night time? They were silent foot soldiers, protecting the terrible secrets in Hawkins.

But Billy hadn't cared about any of this. In fact, at the time he couldn't give a fuck about whether the woods were hiding secrets or the military facility that had recently been closed was haunted or terrible human experiments were taking place there. He'd stop the car right in front of that goodbye sign, on the side of the road, protected by the scary intimacy of the night sky. He'd have a bottle of whiskey with him, always hidden in the boot, so that neither cops nor his father would find it. He'd take it out and drink from it as he'd stare at that fucking sign, at those fucking words and he'd dream that he'd leave and leave and leave, and never look back. Drive with the wind in his hair and his favorite music in his ears and his favorite engine purring under him. He'd dream of being someone else, of erasing his past, of brushing away all the horrible things that his dad had done to him. He'd imagine that it was going to be tough for a few months but he'd think that he had it in him to make it, that his hate for his dad would be a more than enough catalyst of all the good things that Billy would manage to do with his life.

Billy stopped in the same spot where he parked all those months ago but the radio was silent. There was no music and the bottle of whiskey was actually half empty already but he didn't care. It burned like hell – it burned like bitter lava choking the hell out of him. The shroud of silence was covering his very heart and withered away any desire of thinking.

What he hated the most was not the fact that his father had decided out of the blue that he had no longer a son. He fucking hated that he didn't leave on his own terms, slamming the door in Neil's fucking face. He took a deep swig of whiskey and stared some more at the fucking sign. What was the point? What was the point of people being born if the people that gave them life in the first place hated their guts? What was the point in admitting to himself that, deep down inside of him, Billy had hoped that his father would turn out a decent man after all, that maybe he'd see the error of his ways, that maybe he'd just see Billy for the first time as a son?

He burst out laughing, the sounds that he made almost inhuman. A car passed by, the lights blinding him for a second so Billy leaned his forehead against the steering wheel and scrunched his eyes closed. He put the bottle of whiskey in between his feet and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands and gripped hard. It didn't mean much anymore anyway. He had Benny, who was more a father to him than Neil had ever been, and he had Max, who was the best sister that one could have. And he had Steve, who was just the nicest guy that ever walked the earth. He had Hopper, who was a cranky old bastard without coffee running wild through his veins, and he had a pack of rugrats, who were awesome at discussing really smart things (and sometimes, and Billy really meant just sometimes, he thought that they were way smarter than him).

The sobs tore into him suddenly and painfully, snot and tears mixing into an ugly mess but he didn't care. He cried really hard for the boy who had been, for all the times his father hit him and he lay bruised and battered on the floor in the kitchen or in his room, crying and later on, dreaming of just running away. He cried for all those times he lied the doctors or the police or to his friends. He even cried for fucking up Frankie, who had been a really good friend and had only wanted the best for him. But most of all, he cried for his mom and for

the way God allowed cancer to take her away from Billy when in fact, all along, his father had been the miserable and pitiful excuse of a human being who should have died.

He cried for quite a long time, heaving and choking, snot and tears mixing with blood from his busted lip. There were so many things to be thankful for now in his life and so many things that he still resented, that still made him furious beyond belief and pressed against his insides as if all that pettiness and anger were medieval torture devices.

He grabbed the bottle of whiskey and took another deep drag. He'd let the alcohol burn his insides and purify them with its fire and maybe, just maybe Billy would be a better person in the morning again.

He didn't know how long he spent there. At some point, the whiskey was finished and the windows of the Camaro were fogged. His head was spinning in that obnoxious kind of way where he wanted it to stop but his stomach was too queasy to attempt moving.

Suddenly the door opened and Billy almost fell on his face before strong arms caught him. When he looked up, Steve's concerned face waved its way into Billy's focus.

"You're so beautiful, sweetheart," he mumbled with all the coherence of a drunk person. He hiccupped and tried to lean backward, but it was kind of difficult with the way Steve was holding on to him. Like they were both drowning in the middle of a hurricane and no one was going to come and save them. "Steve," he said the word with such reverence that his boyfriend's blush couldn't be hidden away by the darkness surrounding them.

"Jesus, Billy," Steve said mortified and looked over his shoulder. "Help me get him out of the car."

"Yeah, I think that might be a good idea," he slurred his thoughts away and suddenly Byers' face came into focus over Steve's shoulder like a squirrel. Which was kind of funny and it made Billy laugh. "Hey, look at us! The fucked up sons club – me thrown out by that piece of shit," Billy said as he finally stepped out of the car and both

Steve and Byers caught him before he fell flat again. "Harrington here with a dad that doesn't care much. And you Byers, with a fucked up dad as well." He patted awkwardly Jonathan's cheek. "Let's all hold hands and sing Kumbaya." He tried to snatch Steve's hand and almost toppled them over.

"How do you know about my dad?" Jonathan asked as he adjusted Billy's weight and pulled him off Steve as much as he could. His hair was mused and he seemed sleepy but not annoyed. Almost amused, he'd say.

"I talk to Will sometimes." Billy nodded and hummed under his breath. "He's a good kid, Byers. You're lucky to have a little brother like that." Billy swayed again and this time he gripped on Steve's shoulder tight. He lolled his head to one side, nodding sadly at his beautiful boy, "He threw me out, sweetheart." He couldn't have seen Jonathan's widened eyes, even if he had been dead sober. "He finally threw me out."

"I know, I know," Steve said softly. Together they pushed him into the Beemer's back seat and then slammed the door shut. Billy closed his eyes and swallowed thickly. For some unfathomable reason, he wanted to cry again. He pressed his cheek against the cool material and scrunched his eyes tighter. He pulled his knees up as much as he could and then let himself doze off because this was the kind of night that was best to be forgotten.

Steve's BMW seemed to travel at the speed of light because one minute they were almost outside of Hawkins, the next he was being carried upstairs by Benny, concerned and disappointed. Billy would have mentioned that it wasn't his fault this time, that he had a good reason but by then that queasiness had turned into full-blown nausea and as soon as they made into the apartment, he ran to the toilet and dumped half of the whiskey back. He leaned his forehead against the cold tiles and took a deep breath even as Steve continued to massage his back in an attempt to relieve the strain on it from all the dry heaving. When he convinced himself that he wasn't going to puke his guts out, after all, Billy let Steve wipe his face with a cool cloth and take him to the bed where already some aspirin and a cool glass of water awaited him. Steve took his boots and jeans off and pulled a blanket over him. Billy held on to his hand afterward and didn't say

anything else.

There wasn't much to say anyway.

Billy woke up with a pounding headache and a metallic taste in his mouth so foul that he actually gagged all over again. A glass of water rested on the nightstand which he drank in a matter of seconds then laid down again. The muffled sounds in the kitchen, the dull voices and the music that almost reached him made him realize that in spite of all the late morning and the fact that it was a working day, Benny at least was at home.

He went to the bathroom first because he sure as hell looked like death warmed over and he didn't want to face the man without feeling at least a little bit human. He took a long shower and he washed his face several times and brushed his teeth twice, then went back to the room and pulled on a pair of sweats that he had left there in the recent weeks and a clean t-shirt. In the recent week, Billy had made this room more of his own than his bedroom in the Hargrove household and that said something.

He opened the window and let the crisp air flood the room as he made his way to the kitchen. Benny and Steve were talking over a cup of coffee and as soon as he entered the room they both stared back at him with kind eyes. In that very moment, if Billy could have skinned himself and become the man that these two saw in him, he would have. There were few people that showed such kindness and concern to Billy – it was impossible not to appreciate them both.

"I'm fine," he said straight away as he made a beeline for the coffee pot, voice gravelly.

"You look fine," Steve joked and smirked when Billy took a seat next to him and pressed their knees together. Harrington wore a soft-looking polo and Billy rested his head against his shoulder for a few moments.

"Don't be a dipshit, Harrington. It's too goddamn early in the morning."

"Maybe for you," Steve sighed as he slid a little further into Billy's

space, “but I’ll have you know that it’s already noon, smart ass.”

“In that case, why are you missing school?” Billy drank half of cup without even breathing then stared at his boyfriend. As always, Steve had little to no patience at all for his bullshit.

“I wonder why indeed.” Harrington rolled his eyes. “I mean, should I mention the fact that Max called me worried sick about you, the fact that we had to check almost all Hawkins before we managed to find you, or the fact that I had to carry your dead-drunk ass back here while Jonathan drove your car?”

“Byers drove my car?” He scowled at Steve, despite that his head really hurt. “What the hell, Harrington?”

“It was this or letting him hear you waxing poetic about my really pretty eyes.”

“I did no such thing,” Billy hissed, but he blushed heavily because he must have – he was always in awe at Steve’s beautiful eyes. He groaned and leaned his forehead against the table. “Just kill me now.” He turned his head to the side to stare up at Benny, who apparently was highly amused by the whole situation. “You have nothing to say?”

“Nope, I’m enjoying this exchange a little too much.”

“Why aren’t you at work?”

“Lennie could hold the fort while I check up on you. Make sure you’re fine.”

“Well, my dad threw me out of the house,” Billy sighed put upon and plopped back up. “The bastard was actually gleeful about doing it but I managed to tell him some stuff. So there’s that. I’ll permanently live here if you still want me to.”

“Firstly, don’t be stupid, of course, I still do, otherwise, why would I have given you a room that I wasn’t planning on you using it in the first place?” Benny pinched the bridge of his nose then rolled his eyes for good measure. “Secondly, are you all right? Why happened that made him decide this so out of the blue?”

“Who gives a shit?” Billy took another sip of his coffee. “He probably had enough and just couldn't take it anymore. Though basically, he called me a disrespecting faggot and told me to get out. Which reminds me, I need to go and pick up my stuff before he returns from work.”

“You're taking this extremely well,” Steve said, at last, a little bit surprised by the easiness with which Billy was talking about it. And maybe he should have been more affected, but the thing was that last night Billy felt that he had spilled his final tears for Neil, that there was nothing left in him related to this matter. Somehow the sack had been emptied, at last, leaving him brittle and hurt, but somehow stronger as well. And he said so, too.

“I cried all the tears I could for that fucking asshole, no more now.” Billy rubbed his cheek where the slap had landed. His lip still felt tender but it scabbed over the night. “He wants to throw me out? So fucking be it. I'm not at his mercy anymore. I say good riddance to him and let him rot in hell when the time comes.”

“Very mature,” Steve said, but it lacked any malice. Billy simply shrugged and drank the rest of his coffee. He stood up and poured another cup before he returned to the table.

Benny was suspiciously quiet related to this subject, taking into consideration that after Neil had attacked him and cut his mullet, Benny had asked him daily about how he was feeling and whether his father had touched him since then. Billy narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously and said, “Somehow, Hammond, you don't seem that surprised by this turn of events.”

“I don't know what you tell you,” the guy said but because he was a fucking giant, it was quite hard for him to squirm in his seat without the gesture going unnoticed. “I'm glad that at least I don't have to think constantly whether you're safe or not.”

“Which proves exactly my point,” Billy said and leaned forward. “I mean, you're the guy that wouldn't shut up about Neil and what a fucking prick is, always checking on me and making sure I'm all right. And all of a sudden, you won't even get annoyed at the fact that he busted my lip? What gives?”

“Nothing, kid. I think you're reading too much into this whole thing.” Benny stood up and washed his cup, keeping his back at both of them. Billy glanced at Steve who seemed just as confused by the whole situation, so he definitely didn't know wasn't imagining it when he was calling Benny out on it, the whole thing too weird to brush it off. Billy leaned back and crossed his arms over the chest.

“What did you do?” Billy asked quietly, at last, his belligerent ways for once forgotten in favor of trying and finding out the truth. “Has this something to do with Wilson and Mitchell?”

“Nope,” Benny answered and set a covered plate in front of Billy, which revealed scrambled eggs and some toast. “Now eat up, go and pick up your stuff from your dad's place before he shows up. Take Harrington too. You might finish earlier.”

“Benny, what-” Billy started as he grabbed his boss' wrist but Benny just stared back at him. There was something suddenly cold and calculating in his eyes, some sort of iciness that had never been there before, a sense of inexorable will of not revealing anything at all.

“Let's just say that your dad got what he deserved.” Billy caught a glimpse of the war veteran that Benny was, after all, the cold killer instinct that seemed to have prevailed even now. “It's been taken care of and he won't do anything else against you.”

“Are you fucking insane?” Billy snarled and shrugged off Steve's calming hand on his shoulder. “What the hell, Benny? If law enforcement finds out what you did, they'll fucking crucify you. You think Neil will keep his mouth shut forever?”

“Let's just say that the law was on our side,” Benny answered just as calmly as he could given the circumstances, thus heavily implying that Hopper had known all along about this thing, maybe had even been there. “I won't tell you what happened because that way, you'll always get plausible deniability.”

“Benny, what the fuck, man?”

“I couldn't let him do anything to you, like that night,” Benny sneered as he slowly took Billy's hand away from his wrist. “We

protect people in this town and scum like Neil Hargrove don't get to live like that without any consequence attached to their actions. Me and Hopper and a few others decided a long time ago that we wouldn't let any more children be abused like he and so many of our friends were." Benny straightened and scratched at his beard. "So when I promise you that Neil Hargrove won't ever bother you again, I really mean it."

Billy didn't say anything, just stared back at Benny and the implacable way in which he held himself straight and rigid. The curiosity was killing him and he would have gladly paid good money just to find out the truth about that night and whatever happened to Neil at the hands of these war veterans. There had definitely been some Vietnam skills involved and Billy didn't know whether he should feel sicker to his stomach or just be glad that for once, Neil Hargrove had a taste of his own fucking medicine.

"Fine, asshole, but don't think that this discussion is remotely over," he hissed back in reply but his eyes were brilliant blue fire. He would have told so many things to Benny in that very moment – how grateful he was that the giant had his back, how scared he was that he'd lose this, how hopeful for the future he was because he had Benny in his life. Benny who called his army buddies just so he could have a chat with an abusive bastard.

"Whatever," Benny said at last and smiled softly, his brown eyes warming up again. "I'll go back to the shop, you guys just go and pick up your stuff."

"Yeah, yeah." Billy waved as he grabbed his fork and dug into the food. But Benny just ruffled his hair and shook hands with Steve and was out of the apartment before both of them realized what had happened. Steve watched him eating with his soft doe eyes. "Yeah, I know, I'm lucky." Steve just shrugged but kissed Billy and then waited for him to finish eating.

No one was at home when they arrived at the Hargrove house in Steve's Beemer. Steve looked around his room, suddenly curious to see where Billy had lived for so long, touching and studying curiously the books and the clothes and the goddamn trinkets that he was taking with him. They worked quickly, stuffing most of his things

into black bags and a few in boxes. It didn't take long – Neil hadn't been a generous person with his son, to begin with, and after being moved across the country, Billy had kept few things that had meant something to him. Everything fitted in the car's boot and back seat, Billy ensuring that he took the box that held his mom's photographs and all his books. They cleaned the room afterward and dusted it so that Neil wouldn't make Susan or worse, Max, to clean after him.

Billy stood in the middle of the empty room. Although the room was still full of furniture, it had been devoid of the things that gave it personality, that had made it his room. A faint smell of cigarettes still lingered, but nothing else. However, the sadness that he should have felt was not there. This had never been his home – not in the way Benny's room had felt from the start, not in the way his room back in Santa Monica had felt. The melancholy of what could have been but never had been had permeated the walls, but hadn't changed Billy in any way and now all of that was gone.

"It's almost three and we need to pick up the kids as well," Steve said softly and Billy turned to him. He smiled gently and went to do what he had wanted to do for a very long time. He kissed the hell out of Steve Harrington inside his room, under Neil's roof. "What was that for?" Steve asked when they broke apart to catch their breaths, lips red and looking delicious.

"Something I had wanted to do." Billy smiled and patted his boyfriend on the shoulder. "Let's get out of here, pretty boy. There's nothing left for me here anymore."

"Let's go." Steve wrapped his arm around Billy's shoulders and together they walked out of his room. They grabbed the garbage bags to throw them on the way out when Susan opened the door and faced them like a frightened rabbit, walking in on something bloody and gruesome, holding on to her purse as they planned to rob her.

"Hello, Mrs. Hargrove," Steve greeted with a shy smile and he passed her by with one bag, not waiting for Billy, for which he was extremely grateful.

Susan looked pale and somehow guilty. She swallowed thickly before she said faintly, "Hello. Billy, I-"

"Spare me, Susan." Billy raised the garbage bag again and passed her by. "I cleaned up my room, you can do whatever you want with it." He took out the key to the house and gave it to her together with a small piece of paper. Her hand trembled when she finally dared to take them both. "I intend to keep contact with Max," he said, still staring her down. "I'll keep on picking her and dropping her off at school. You have my number there from the autoshop and the place where I moved, in case you need me to pick her up some other times. Or have her call me."

"Okay, thank you, Billy." Susan's hand fisted on the key and the paper. "I want to say – that is – I'm sorry, Billy. I never meant for this to happen."

"But it did and you let it happen," he said, keeping his voice leveled and waving her away when she opened her mouth to add something else. "You wanted to protect Max, I get it. You've been far more decent than he's ever been to me." He leaned a little bit into her space and hissed, "But if I hear that you let Neil do to her what he did to me, I'll fucking take her from you so fast, you won't know what hit you. Don't ever let Neil touch her! Or you, for that matter. I don't think he will, but still, promise me."

"I promise you, Billy." Susan's words rang true and Billy hoped that they didn't sound true only because he had scared her. Whatever had hidden behind her words, there was nothing he could do anymore. "I'm glad that you are brother and sister, Billy. I," she stammered and let her arms fall alongside her body, "I am really sorry, Billy."

They stared at each other as a silent agreement passed between them. There were new rules laid before them, a secret promise of protecting Max no matter what. And Billy somehow knew that Susan was going to keep her promise. In the end, he simply nodded curtly and left.

Steve was waiting for him, smiling softly, and Billy felt he could finally breathe.

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"Mr. Hargrove, a word if I may," Mr. Anderson, his Math teacher, said with his usual blasé voice and Billy actually rolled his eyes,

before he stopped in his tracks and turned around. Everyone snickered as if he was in trouble but for once Billy had kept his mouth shut so it couldn't be about that. Mr. Anderson was a tall and thin man, with a thick mane of red hair and an aquiline nose, on which a pair of dark-rimmed glasses rested. He was always wearing a vest over his white shirt, but he was pretty cool when he wanted to be, so mostly Billy tried to pay attention in his class. Math had always made sense to Billy. No negotiated shades of grey, just applied rules and straightforward tactics.

Mr. Anderson came from behind his desk and leaned against it, crossing his arms. He asked in a friendly tone, "Mr. Hargrove, did you apply to any colleges?" The question came out of the blue but it sure as hell was a familiar chorus as pretty much everyone around him had asked Billy this at some point in the recent weeks.

"No, sir. I'm not planning on going to college."

"I'm surprised to hear that as I noticed that most of your classes are in the advanced programme." Mr. Anderson placidly pushed the glasses further up on the bridge of his nose. "I believed that you'd be interested to attend some community classes at the very least."

"No, sir, I don't have a good opinion on higher education." Billy shrugged and kept his voice carefully blank. "Even if I'd want to, I don't have the financial means anymore."

"There are other ways to receive appropriate financial support—"

"Thank you, Mr. Anderson," Billy interrupted him as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't want to start a new life with debts. It'll be hard enough as it is."

"Are you planning to move outside of Hawkins once you graduate?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where to?"

"I'm not sure yet," Billy shrugged. "But no offense, sir," and he suddenly grinned, sharp and wide like a shark, "wherever that may be, it would still be better than Hawkins."

“Yes, it may be so,” Mr. Anderson actually chuckled, most likely amused by Billy's youthful enthusiasm. “I'm just just a bit disappointed that you don't apply your mind to further education. You could do brilliantly.”

“Thank you.” Billy was actually touched by his teacher's thoughts. Coming from a teacher like Mr. Anderson that had always kept a distance between himself and his students, meant quite a lot for Billy. “I appreciate it.”

Mr. Anderson dismissed him with a slight nod and a gentle smile, “But if you change your mind at some point in the future, I'd be more than happy to write a reference letter for you. I will give you my contact details after Spring Break.”

“That's kind of you, Mr. Anderson, but are you sure you want to do this?” The curl of his lips turned a little jaded at the corners. However, his teacher was definitely not fooled.

“Yeah, I like playing with fire every once in a while.”

They both laughed and Billy shook his head as he got out of the classroom, oddly touched by the gesture. There had been other teachers as well that had mentioned college and university studies but mostly as a means to blackmail him into playing nice and listening to their boring discourses. But Mr. Anderson was the only one to offer him a somewhat different opportunity. He smiled, throwing back a glance at the door that now closed behind him – Billy had never sought genuine validation from people in a position of power but it was gratifying receiving it nonetheless. His popularity had been an armor, a means to forget all about his terrible life at home and to spend as much time as he possibly could outside of his father's reach.

It was baffling how some strangers always managed to see the best in him, to support and encourage him to do better, whereas his own flesh and blood had always seen the worst in him. Billy was still confused about which side was right and which side was wrong.

For all intents and purposes, Hawkins had been like a curse for Billy, his father taking away everything that Billy had loved. Yet, he had

found more supportive people than he would have ever had back in California. He pushed his thoughts of Neil Hargrove at the back of his mind. No need to dig out the dead.

A feeble spring sun bathed the parking lot in its shimmering light and Billy stared at it in disgust as he made his way out of the school's main building, accompanied by Steve and one of his classmates, Jason G., who had waited for him outside the class. Jason G. was not to be confused with Jason L., who had recently moved out from Hawkins together with half of his family when his mom had found out that his dad had been banging a waitress two towns over. In spite of suddenly being the only Jason in their generation, people still kept the G (from Gallo, for once a welcomed respite from all the H surnames that seemed to float around).

"I'm not saying you're wrong," Billy was telling him as he approached the parking lot, Jason G. and Steve following in his footsteps, "but you're wrong."

"You can't possibly argue that Metallica is one of the biggest bands in the world when they just had two albums, dipshit," Jason rolled his eyes. "Let's call them great when they're going to produce more material than two fucking albums or go on more tours than just one."

"Yeah, well, just because you suddenly decided you liked Anthrax, dickhead, doesn't make them that great either. I mean, *Fistful of Metal* appeared just one year ago." Billy pulled the coat tighter against his body but still didn't zip it up to Steve's exasperation. "What? One fucking album and they're fucking great all of a sudden?"

"Need I fucking remind you, you like them too, asshole? I swear to God, you're so fucking obtuse."

"Oh wow, Jason G. learned his English vocabulary!" Jason just flipped him off as Billy returned the gesture. "Man, don't get me wrong, I like Anthrax too, but Metallica is just better."

"Harrington, back me up on this," Jason nudged the boy as he stopped by his car, an ugly Buick that had seen better fucking days but who was Billy to judge? Billy was also currently refraining from judging Jason's ugly flannel shirt, which would need a wash because

teenage boys were disgusting no matter what people said. By comparison, Harrington looked too fucking preppy with his black sweater and dark blue jeans, not to mention his dark blue coat. Billy just had to mess with it later on this evening when they'd meet at the quarry.

At the moment though, Harrington shoved one hand into his pocket and rolled his eyes at the both of them as he pinched the bridge of his nose, saying utterly exasperated, "I can barely stand Metallica as it is, I have no clue who Anthrax are and I probably won't ever give a shit either."

Jason shook his head and stared in disbelief at Billy, who actually laughed at him, "I know. Harrington has horrible taste in music. He likes The fucking Police, for fuck's sake."

"What the fuck?" Jason shook his head in disgust and reached for Billy's shoulder. He abruptly stopped and pretended to look for his smokes. Everyone on the basketball team and their mother knew that Billy wasn't to be touched without enough warning. Unless one wanted to count their teeth after or be decked. "For fuck's sake, Billy, how can you be friends with this loser?"

"Meh, we're working on it."

"I'm right here, assholes." Steve crossed his arms, although he made a poor effort of hiding his delight at listening to the banter between Jason and Billy, who had to admit that maybe not all the fucking dipshits from Hawkins had terrible taste in music. Or movies. Jason seemed like a cool guy, in spite of his close affiliation with Tommy's parties.

"Whatever, dude." Jason shook hands with both of them and then got into the car, his cigarette pressed tightly between his thin lips, his curly hair as unruly as ever. "See you later, losers."

"Whatever, dipshit." Billy grinned sharply when Jason flipped him off and started the engine. Billy shook his head slightly amused and made his way towards his car as he nudged Steve with his shoulder. Without even realizing, his own shoulders had stopped trying to become a tense line and his entire body seemed to slump. "See you

tonight at the quarry?" he asked amused by the way Steve tried to fight with the breeze that left his hair in disarray each time it passed them by.

"Yeah." Steve smiled still slightly annoyed at the edges and Billy was about to add something else when he stopped short in front of his Camaro. Lucas Sinclair was leaning against it.

"Uhm, pretty boy, I think you lost one of your kids," he remarked casually and Sinclair didn't disappoint when he rolled his eyes at him and crossed his arms. Billy smirked and pointing at his car, he added, "This cool Camaro is mine. Pretentious BMW is over there."

"I wouldn't actually know it, with the amount of time you spend with Steve," Sinclair snapped and waved him away when Billy opened his mouth to say something scathing for sure. Steve was snickering on the side and Billy would deal with that shit later. "I don't have time for this. I just heard that next week is Max's birthday and I wanted to ask you what I should buy her because Dustin's ideas are too over the top and Mike's are useless. As for Will, he already has a great idea for a gift and I hate him."

"Her birthday is in May, shitbird." Billy lit a cigarette as Sinclair's self-confidence drowned in a pool of confusion.

"Whose birthday she was talking about then?"

"Mine probably. It's on April ninth, which technically is next week." From the corner of his eye, Billy could see the way Steve stared at him in disbelief and yeah, maybe he should have mentioned that some time ago. But he really didn't see what the fucking point was.

"Oh, okay. I don't care about that." Sinclair shrugged, looking satisfied, and uncrossed his arms as he suddenly stared at Billy looking quite hopeful. "In that case, can I get a ride?"

"Again, I think you have me confused with Harrington here."

"I couldn't. He has better hair than you do."

"Just for that, Sinclair, I should let you walk."

"But you still need to pick up Max and she won't like to hear that you let her dear *dear* friend walk all alone by himself through the creepy-"

"For fuck's sake, just get in the car before I strangle you." Sinclair got in with a winning smile. Billy turned to Steve and scowled. "This is all your fucking fault, Harrington, as always."

"I feel like this time you totally deserve it because you're a fucking asshole that never mentioned his fucking birthday to me in the first place." Steve looked ridiculous with his hair blown to one side and his eyes all wide and actually hurt by this insignificance that Billy seemingly applied to his birthday.

"Well, I haven't celebrated my birthday in a while so don't get your panties in a twist, pretty boy. It's no big deal."

"Why didn't you celebrate your birthday?" Steve came closer while still paying attention to their surroundings. The parking lot was still populated with quite a lot of students and although everyone knew that the two kings were close now, they couldn't be that close. There was also Sinclair to consider as he was doing a good job of pretending that he wasn't peering at them from under his lashes.

"My dad used to be a prick each time I'd try and have a nice celebration so I just gave up on them after my mom died." Steve's eyes turned softly. "Oh, don't worry, pretty boy, I am used to it so please enough with the puppy eyes. I can only endure so much." Billy grinned and ruffled Steve's hair. "I got to go and drop his majesty home, drop my sister off as well, and make sure I'm out of there before fucking Neil shows up from work. So I'll see you later at the quarry, okay?"

"Yeah, see you later, asshole."

Billy got in the car and glanced at Sinclair who still hadn't put his seatbelt on. Billy raised one eyebrow, not moving a single muscle. Rolling his eyes again, Sinclair put the seatbelt on before the Camaro started to purr under both of them.

"Who would have thought that you're such a stickler for rules and

regulations,” Sinclair mumbled as he fiddled with the radio. Billy batted his hand away then took a drag from his cigarette. The boy leaned back in his seat and glowered at Billy, who was definitely not impressed. Deep down, he admired the fire inside of the boy because it meant he would be good for Max as well.

“I don't want to lose my license because you were too lazy to follow the goddamn rules, Sinclair.”

“You do realize that you're not wearing the seatbelt at the moment, right?” The younger boy pointed out with an annoyed sigh and Billy thought back to Steve and wondered for the millionth time how he could have so much patience with these little brats.”It doesn't make you cooler if you're breaking such important regulations.”

“Well, my car, my rules.” Billy glanced quickly and grinned sharply at him. “Unless you want to walk, which is fine by me.”

“No, thanks.” Sinclair shrugged indifferently. “Your life, your loss.”

“Thanks, that's more like it.”

“So did you see *The Thing*?” Sinclair asked after five seconds of silence. Billy heavily suspected that none of the damn kids would be able to keep their mouth shut for more than a second so the fact that Sinclair actively tried to make conversation with him was no surprise – well, maybe a little since they weren't on friendly terms despite their fragile pact.

“Yeah, Kurt Russell is the shit,” he replied and launched into a rant about people's general opinions of the movie.

Max found them together in the parking lot ten minutes later, heatedly discussing the end of the movie as they couldn't agree what had actually happened. She watched them confused for about five seconds as she couldn't determine who was more insane: her boyfriend and the way he kept on telling Billy he was absolutely wrong or her brother for arguing with a boy five years younger than him.

“Seriously, can anyone explain to me what the hell are you two doing

together?" She asked still confused as she got in the car, turning in the passenger seat so she could stare down the both of them. Billy used the same tactic on her and she rolled her eyes but complied and put her seatbelt on.

"Your boyfriend here thought it was your birthday next week and he was panicking about his gift for you," Billy said, pointing with his thumb in the back and smirking when Sinclair hit the driver seat in retaliation.

"Asshole!" He added for good measure but Billy was highly amused by the sudden flush that bloomed on his face and how Max followed quickly in his steps. So they were boyfriend and girlfriend after all – he'd have to have a talk with the boy real soon about treating his sister the right way. Billy paid attention to the road, hiding his gentle smile behind another cigarette.

"Where did you get the idea that it might be my birthday?" Max mumbled, playing with the cuff from her jacket, splotches of red spreading over her cheeks. "My one is in May."

"Well, I heard you talking to Jane about someone's birthday, not this dickhead's right here." Sinclair hit the chair one more time and Billy scowled at him in the rearview mirror. "I thought he might help me get you a nice present but now I'm just relieved that's in May because until then, I can come up with something way better than this asshole would have ever suggested."

"I think you're forgetting that this asshole saved you from the embarrassment of giving her a present next week and wishing her a happy birthday when it most definitely wouldn't have been her birthday. Plus, I'm giving you a ride. So stop hitting my chair!"

"Okay, both of you need to chill." Max scowled at the both of them. "Lucas, just be happy that Billy here told you when it's my actual birthday. And you, Billy, be happy that you were asked in the first place. Now, what are your plans for your birthday?"

"Non-existent." He took a drag from his cigarette and realizing that its fire was long since extinguished, he threw it out the window disgusted. When he returned his attention back to the people inside

his car, he caught a glimpse in the mirror of Sinclair's eyes widening in surprise. He side-glanced his sister, "You know fully well that I don't celebrate my birthday, Max."

"But I thought that-" She bit her lip but remained silent, acknowledging thus that there were certain points in their discussion that she couldn't make with Lucas Sinclair present in the car. Yeah, she probably thought that with Billy out of the Hargrove household, all of a sudden the tradition might change. In reality, Billy just wanted for the day to be over and be finally eighteen so he could become his own master. "I thought that since you turn eighteen," she cleared her voice and said more firmly, "you were going to celebrate it all the more."

"You know very well, Max, that I wanted to turn eighteen for a different reason. Now that the reason is gone, I don't need any big fucking party. So can we just forget about it? Also, could you please stop telling people about my birthday?"

"Well, it's too late now," Sinclair snickered in the back seat. "Steve found out about it."

"Steve found out about it?" Max grinned openly and turned into her seat to face the front again. "Well, that's great then."

"I don't know what's so great about it but you two need to shut up with all this birthday talk." He pressed his lips against a new cigarette and ran his fingers through his hair, back stiffening. "And stop spreading the word as well."

"Who are we going to tell?" Sinclair stared at him in disbelief. "We have better things to discuss than you, rock-n-roll boy. Besides, it's Spring Break next week anyway. It's not like we could put a happy birthday banner at the entrance of Hawkins High."

"Although that would have been hilarious," Max chipped in and Billy seriously considered the idea that these kids were fucking terrifying when they wanted to be. "And it would have served you well for being an asshole about the whole thing."

"We could always do it after the holiday," Sinclair suggested to Billy's

exasperation. He found himself sighing multiple times throughout the ride at the terrible ideas that Max and Sinclair kept on coming up with for his birthday. In fact, he was actually happy to drop Sinclair off first because the boy had a devilish imagination and some of the scenarios were just embarrassing for Billy.

"Don't you dare mention any of these brilliant ideas to Steve, you got me?" Billy hissed when he parked in front of the Hargrove house.

"Why?" Max smirked all-knowingly.

"You know very well why."

"I know but I want you to say it."

"Because."

"Because is not an answer, Billy." Max patted her chin with her index finger, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Maybe I should mention something to him like, I don't know, that you love spread rose petals in your room. Or better yet, I should ask him to help us put that banner up."

"Okay, okay." Billy sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Steve would go out of his way to celebrate my birthday, and although for once, it seems like I have something to celebrate, I don't want him to make a fuss over it."

"He loves you, Billy," Max said slightly exasperated. "Of course he'd want to celebrate it."

"He hasn't said anything about love, Max. Jesus!"

"Don't be a mouth-breather! Of course, he loves you, he doesn't need to say it to make it true. And it's not like you said it either, but you sure as hell are in love with him."

"You know, I'm starting to miss all those times when you refused to speak with me," Billy said without malice, conveniently forgetting the fact that he was the one that told her what happened at the garage and about his conversation with Steve – okay, telling might be too much for the talk that they had because Max, vibrating with

enthusiasm, kept asking him question after question, to which he would just grunt in acknowledgement or shake his head.

“Keep fooling yourself,” Max tossed back but then watched him carefully. “You’re allowed to be happy, Billy,” she added softly. “Neil can’t hurt you anymore and you have people now that love you and care for you. You’re allowed to celebrate your birthday and be happy about it.”

“It’s hard, Max,” he admitted grudgingly but didn’t continue the idea. There were still quite a lot of things that lingered between the two of them. Secrets that most likely would never get to be spoken about out loud – she still didn’t know the extent of the abuse that Neil had inflicted on him, and he still didn’t know what she was doing at the Byers’ place that fateful night all those months ago. But he was grateful for Max the way he was grateful for Steve and Benny. So he just smiled at her, genuine and warm, happy that they still got to be siblings.

“I’ll be fine, Mad Max,” he said gently and hugged her bony shoulders.

“You always say that and you never are,” she rebuked him but still squeezed the hell out of him.

“I promise this time I’m not lying.”

“You’d better not, asshole.”

“Your love for me is sublime.”

“Shut up, dickhead.”

He ruffled her hair for good measure to annoy her all the more and he wasn’t disappointed when she scowled hard at him but let him go and got out of the car, waving and grinning. Neil had been surprisingly cooperative about this aspect, allowing Max to still meet her brother and be picked up or dropped by, without so much as a whisper of annoyance. Which begged the question to what extent the sheriff and the others had threatened him. Maybe he’d get the full story from Benny one day and maybe his friend would take the story

to the grave, but whatever had happened that night to Neil Hargrove was well fucking deserved and Billy didn't feel one ounce of pity or empathy for the guy.

He watched the house for a moment and thought about the unending nightmare that he had lived inside of it at the hands of his own father. He still couldn't believe that Neil hadn't even waited until he turned eighteen to throw him out, a fact that might have had a more serious impact on him, had he not had anyone to support him. He would have ended up on the streets. For all he knew, that was what Neil Hargrove might have hoped for that night.

Billy lit another cigarette and opened the window wider before starting the engine and getting back on the streets. He had been waiting for so long to turn eighteen that now that it was within his reach, Billy didn't know what to think of it. The last threads that had connected him to his previous life in California, to whoever he was back then, had been cut the moment he had finally confronted his father and been kicked out for good measure. There was someone new inside of him, a little calmer, a little more pensive, but just as wild – still drowning in resentment, still hating his father. Neil Hargrove had done one single good thing for his son and that was bringing him here in Hawkins.

Billy sighed as his stomach bottomed up. He really hoped that no one was going to mention anything about his birthday.

And time appeared to agree with him. Although Steve hadn't been happy with Billy for not telling him about his incoming birthday, he didn't insist on it and the rest of the gang appeared to have followed his example. Well, Sinclair did say that he didn't care much about it to begin with, so Billy hoped that it was in assent of everyone else. When the weekend rolled in and they were officially on Spring Break, as everyone seemed more preoccupied with celebrating Easter rather than his birthday, Billy breathed more easily.

He should have known better.

Tuesday evening, tired and sore, from changing so many goddamn tires and recalibrating them, Billy made his way home – it really was a home, more than his own one had ever been after his mom's death

– making plans to eat, take a shower and fall asleep. Although Benny was living on the second floor, Billy felt like Sisyphus, climbing up the stairs like an old man in need of a hip replacement. By the time he made it to the door, he was ready to forgo any meals or showers and just crash into bed. During the holidays he had been working at Benny's full time, trying to make as much money as he could and save for the future, but spring had brought a lot of cars in need of changing their tires after the winter they just had and Billy was kind of sick and tired of that.

Sighing in relief, he opened the door and froze in the doorway. He blinked several times and shook his head. When the image didn't disappear, he closed the door again and took a deep breath. He opened it again and nothing changed.

Everyone was gathered inside of Benny's crammed living-room. And when he said, everyone, he really meant everyone. Benny and Tamara were sitting in a corner, grinning guiltily, and Billy would most definitely have a word with Lennie tomorrow about liars with their Benny has some stuff to sort out and needs to leave earlier horseshit. Next to them was Hopper and a curly-haired girl, kind of intense eyes and watching Billy like a hawk – he assumed that she was Hopper's adoptive daughter, about whom he heard so much. Max and the rest of the gang were spread on the couch and around it and Steve was the closest to the door.

“Oh, you fucking bastard!” Billy hissed as he pulled Steve by the t-shirt into a tight hug. “I thought I said no celebration.”

“I have no clue what the hell you're talking about, your highness,” Steve hugged just as tight. “I wasn't going to let this day go by without doing anything special for it, Billy,” Steve whispered just for him to hear. “Happy birthday, dickhead!”

“Whatever, pretty boy,” he growled back and wiped disgusted at his cheek when Steve planted a wet kiss on it. Steve stepped back a little, his left arms still around Billy's shoulders and honestly, sometimes his boy was just too fucking obvious.

“I'm not going to kiss you or hug you, pal,” Henderson hollered from the couch, still engrossed in one of Benny's automotive magazines. He

was still wearing his never-missing cap but for once he was wearing a blue jumper. Billy was actually mortified to realize that maybe Steve had made everyone dress well for his birthday while he was still wearing a stained t-shirt that smelled of oil and sweat.

“Thanks, Henderson, I really appreciate your candor,” Billy said as he let himself be hugged by Max. “Hey, Mad Max! Are you okay being here so late? Won't you have problems with Neil?”

“Nope. I spoke with mum and she said it's fine as long as Steve or you could drop me back home.” She hugged him tighter still. “Happy birthday, big brother.”

“Thanks, Max,” he muttered back, oddly touched by her calling him her brother. He was immensely grateful for her presence in his life and Susan had done one good thing for Billy – he appreciated the fact that she hadn't reinforced Neil's ban and that she let them be siblings in spite of the fact that they weren't linked by blood. Maybe he'd never get to have the same kind of bond that Steve had with Henderson and basically all the other kids, but there was a maturity to their relationship that he had been touched by and grateful for. That had been by far the best gift of this year.

“Happy birthday, kid,” Hopper came to shake his hand and pushed gently the girl forward. “This is my daughter, Jane.” He said her name with the pride of a new parent and for a moment Billy expected him to whip out some pictures and start telling him about all Jane's accomplishments. Billy stared for a moment at the both of them: it didn't seem a far-fetched scenario.

“Hi,” she said quietly. “My name is Jane, but everyone calls me El.” She shook hands with him as almost everyone in the room groaned. Billy missed the point of it so he just smiled at the girl.

“Nice to meet you, Elle.”

She squeezed his hand and suddenly her eyes widened as her lips curled into a beautiful smile. She looked back at Steve, who for some reason was suddenly blushing and looking away, then turned her attention back to Billy.

"Happy birthday," she said and although the words pressed against each other somewhat hesitantly, they came out sincere and happy.

"Thank you." There was definitely something that Billy was missing. It was clear in the way the whole room seemed to sigh collectively and relax. Elle didn't appear aware of it as she continued to smile at both Billy and Steve and wondered whether she could read minds and see the connection between the two of them. Whatever had happened and whatever had transpired between the two of them, it made everyone else more relaxed and even Mike Wheeler softened his bitch face and threw a grudging Happy Birthday before coming to sit next to Elle, to Hopper's exasperation.

"You two are fucking assholes, too!" He swore as he hugged both Tamara and Benny and she laughed softly into his ear.

"Be glad we didn't scream happy birthday and threw pink confetti at you like this guy wanted," Tamara replied and kissed him on the cheek. She stepped back a little and smiled kindly at him. "Happy Birthday, sweetheart!"

"Thank you," he said and kissed her cheek shyly before turning to Benny, who still had an arm wrapped around Billy's shoulders. "Pink confetti, jolly giant? Seriously?"

"If I wouldn't do it, then who would?" Benny pouted and yes, it was as ridiculous as one could imagine it. "But she ruined my fun so no confetti for you after all."

"Or birthday hats," Tamara chipped in and everyone laughed when they saw Billy's horrified face.

"You're so lucky you're a fucking giant because otherwise, your ass would have been grass by now," Billy glowered but let himself be hugged by Benny.

"Language, Hargrove," Hopper said, his mouth half-full with cookies. "There are minors around here."

"Yeah, and they talk way dirtier than you might think," Billy tossed back over Benny's shoulder. "I thought we weren't going to do this,"

he said somewhat grudgingly when he had managed to hug everyone. He took a seat next to Steve, their knees knocking together. His boyfriend smiled shyly but set his hand on his knee in a poorly disguised attempt at pretending that he was offering stability.

“We weren't,” Henderson tossed back quickly before Steve could say so much as a word. “But then Steve threatened us all and there we are.”

“Actually, I was threatened by Max,” Sinclair added his two cents in, glancing every once in a while to Henderson's magazine. “She's far more frightening than Steve.”

“I'm just here for the cake,” Mike shrugged and winced when Will poked his elbow in between his ribs. Will and Billy had developed an odd friendship based on their mutual love for the Gunslinger series and King's novels. Not to mention that Billy had seen the comics that the kid had drawn and they had been fucking amazing. Something told him that in perhaps fifteen years he would get to boast about the fact that he knew the kid while he had been still in middle school.

“I have no clue why I am here,” Hopper said to the amusement of the adults in the room, “but apparently, it was important to come here so there you go.”

“Wow, I can feel the love,” Billy tossed back mockingly and knocked his shoulder against Steve's who grinned back. “Is this why you gathered them all in one room, pretty boy? So I'd be taken down a peg or two?”

“Well, actually I told them to behave,” Steve pressed each word as he scowled at the young ones, “but then I see it was an impossible task for them. I'll have to remind them of this when their birthdays come. Except you, Will, you're my favorite from now on.” Will blushed heavily but still managed to smile softly at Steve. Billy leaned forward a little and he ruffled the kid's hair as Steve's hand tightened its grip on his thigh.

“Hey, I came, I was civil, why don't I get the favorite place?” Henderson spluttered in outrage. “By the way, I saw you have *Cujo*, asshole,” he pointed an accusing finger at Billy, “so don't think I'm

leaving tonight, without borrowing that book from you.”

“Henderson, aren't you doing things differently?” Billy grinned as he took a sip from his Cola that Tamara shoved in his hand at some point. “Weren't' you supposed to give me a present?”

“Will and I brought you a present,” Elle said and Billy looked at her in surprise when she added, “And it's El, like the letter, not Elle like the girl enchanted.”

“Okay,” he agreed hesitantly as he stared back at Hopper. The sheriff just waved a hand dismissively as if to say just roll with it, his shoulders slumping in defeat – the girl did seem more of a cool name type of person than a boring one like Jane.

Billy was touched to discover that it wasn't just El and Will that had bought him a present. In fact, all of them seemed to have been trying their hardest to come up with incredible gifts for Billy. His stomach bottomed up each time he opened a new gift for the kids. Will and El had made bookmarks for him with Billy drawn as the Gunslinger from *The Dark Tower* series and as Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy – Billy shouldn't have been so happy with the nerdy stuff, but Will Byers had such a talent at drawing that Billy actually ended up liking the bookmarks more than anything else. Henderson and Wheeler had pitched in together and bought him *Thinner*, the latest Richard Bachman's novel. Max and Sinclair chose for him a Led Zeppelin t-shirt together with a new copy of *The Silmarillion* and it was the best combination ever since Led Zeppelin were famous for their admiration of the Tolkien's works. And Steve had bought a nice little radio for him that he could listen to all the cassettes he wanted since Neil had made sure that Billy could take only the things that he had paid for or worked for.

Billy felt his throat tight and clogged with sudden emotion, but still allowed himself sink in the depth of the genuine affection that floated around the room. It was officially his eighteenth birthday – Billy had always viewed it as a means to escape his father, but also Susan and Max whom he had hated at the time. It had always been a means to an end and never a joyous occasion that he'd get to fucking celebrate with people that genuinely cared about him. As he looked around the room, even the pack of brats had come to celebrate him and had

brought him really thoughtful gifts – he might never be part of their party but they sure as hell cared for him and that actually meant more than any secret club.

He had a sister that loved him and a boyfriend that was in for the long haul, a giant older brother who was more of a father really and perhaps another maternal figure. He had all of the things he had been secretly craving for and Billy didn't know what to do with himself.

It was all too much. Feeling overwhelmed, he stood up and under the guise of changing his clothes, he went to his room and sat on the side of the bed, taking deep breaths, hands slightly shaking as he kept tugging at his hair.

“The first time they celebrated my birthday,” El's voice startled him so bad he almost fell down the floor, “I ran out in the woods.” He didn't even hear her when she came inside the room. She was leaning against the door and suddenly looked far older than her years. “I was ashamed to tell them that it was too much. But Jim didn't get angry – he just hugged me and told me that it was fine.”

“You are lucky,” he muttered, knowing that there was a more serious story behind her words.

“So are you.” She looked down and away, wringing her hands a little. In her blue dress with red flowers at the margins, she looked like a normal girl about to attend high school. Although her eyes told the story of an old soul, she had all the mannerisms of a little girl. “I didn't mean to snoop but I did. You had a Papa as well.”

“Papa?” Billy repeated confused, his clammy hands curling around his own knees.

“My first father.” Her eyes turned granite when they stared back at him. “Not a nice man.” Billy swallowed thickly. As if a candle had been snuffed out inside of him. “Your first dad was bad too.”

“How do you know?” His voice was barely there.

“I just do. Bad men do bad things and they leave a mark.” She switched her weight from one leg to another. “But the second dad

will be better for you.”

“Second dad?”

“Benny.” This time her smile reached her eyes again. “He’s a good man. Tamara too. Good mom. Just like Joyce.”

Billy didn’t know what to make of this conversation and if he was being honest with himself, he was a little pissed off that Hopper had talked with his daughter about him. But on the other hand, he understood on a fundamental level that he and El had gone through the same kind of shit, maybe she had to endure even worse and that thought alone didn’t sit well with him at all. Sometimes, Billy had let himself be so wrapped up in his own pain that he had found himself in the impossibility of thinking about other people going through the same kind of shit as he did. And it hurt to think that this little girl had undergone the same horrible treatment.

“He has a lousy sense of humor though,” he replied at last because there wasn’t anything else to say. Although, somehow, Billy got the feeling that El understood him.

“Jim too,” she admitted quietly amused.

“Thank you.”

She nodded and got out of the room, closing the door behind her with a soft click. Billy stared back at the door for what felt like ages. But then he slowly stood up and changed into a comfortable pair of jeans and a blue t-shirt and went back in the living room. There was cake after all and he was damned if he wasn’t going to eat at least two slices.

It was his birthday. And somehow that mattered to the people around him.

He sat back next to Steve, who smiled all sweet and tender. Billy would have kissed him if he could. Gentle and nice the way Steve truly deserved. But he settled for a tight squeeze of his thigh and a gentle pat on the back. He’d make sure to thank his boy later.

~O~

"Bilbo went to sleep with that in his ears, and it gave him very uncomfortable dreams. It was long after the break of day, when he woke up". Billy swallowed thickly as he put the book aside and kissed Steve's hot forehead. He frowned. The fever didn't seem to have gone down in spite of the medicine and the lukewarm shower that he had taken that afternoon. Steve burrowed into his chest even more as if he was trying to dig a hole inside of Billy and never come back to the surface ever again.

"Bilbo is in for a great adventure," Steve muttered and Billy winced at hearing his hoarse voice. It sounded as if Steve had taken a shot of gravel mixed with broken glass – Billy hated the fact that he wasn't able to do much other than making the occasional tea and the hot chicken soup, which was still simmering downstairs in the kitchen because Steve could barely swallow and couldn't eat anything else. Also, his mom had always said that chicken soup could cure anything. (She had been clearly lying because it sure as hell didn't cure her but that was just a point of grudge on Billy's part and there wasn't much he could do about it).

"He is," Billy said at last and leaned his cheek over Steve's soft hair. Secretly, he loved when Steve didn't use his Farah Fawcett hairspray (and that had been the funniest shit ever to find out about his boyfriend) and just let his hair be floppy and soft to the touch like the finest silk ever made.

The afternoon sun spilled messily inside Steve's room, giving everything a kind of golden hue – it touched their twined legs painting them in shades and light. Billy watched their feet covered in warm socks, watched the way Steve kept a leg over Billy's at all times, their grey sweats matching. The t-shirts were different colors – Steve's was blue, the second one for the day, already sweaty because of the fever, while Billy's was black, its sleeves cut, and with a hole in the side. The bug that Steve caught from that little shit Henderson had kept him in bed for the past two days, Spring Break officially ruined as Friday had rolled over them with the strength of a good thing about to end.

The house had fallen silent around them, something that Billy welcomed. With a small sniffing sound, Steve shuffled a little closer, despite being probably not as comfortable as he might have liked to

be. Billy tightened his arms around him and let the quietness tremble around them, somehow wishing that he could hold Steve even closer. The magic of being together wasn't going to wear off anytime soon and the simple fact that some people were aware of their relationship and full heartedly accepted it somehow gave it validation, something that Billy had never had before. Or ever dreamed of having.

The recent months had brought him marvelous gifts. He wasn't sure that he deserved them because deep down Billy was aware that the hurricane inside of him had simmered down to a storm, but that particular storm still raged on. There were still so many things to learn, so many new things to adjust to, none of them more extraordinary than not living in that horrifying state of constant fear and tension. He had tried to explain to Max in the very first few days afterward – when she had still been worried for him, probably picturing the worst scenarios – but he found himself in the impossibility to do so. Words could no longer convey how hard it was for him to adjust to a normal life where nobody controlled the way he looked, the way he spoke, the way he behaved and where even the smallest gestures for once met no consequence at all.

Adjusting to a life where suddenly violence was out of the cards, adjusting to a life where his opinions were valid and he didn't have to defend them, adjusting to a life where his space was respected, where his individuality was celebrated and even more, acknowledged to a profound level – it had been unimaginable for Billy. And incredibly difficult to accept. He was still struggling with it.

There had been instances when he had lashed out at Benny without a particular reason. There had been moments when he could barely speak with Tamara without getting defensive and get embarrassed no matter how many times she had told him that it was fine – or worse, he'd splutter like a pissed off cat then get flushed with that bitter shame, aware that he was blowing everything out of proportion, but he still couldn't help himself. His father's words and actions had cut deep over the years and the scars had remained, raw and sore and fucking painful. The shame of feeling weak had run hot and bitter through his veins. In those moments, he'd retreat to his room and crash on the bed, screaming in frustration, muffled by the pillow and by his own ineptitude.

Tamara would be the only one to let him simmer, let the anger boil over and then she'd seek to speak with him. Trying to explain that his frustration was perfectly natural, more so because he had expected that the moment he had been out of the Hargrove household, he would have been able to be free. And cured. And it wasn't so. That had been Billy's greatest disappointment. He was feeling like an Atlas shrugged by his own weight, like an Atlas that had suddenly been relieved from the burden that he had been carrying on his shoulders, but that now was supposed to learn how to live with a crooked back.

"Billy, I get it," Benny said on the other side of the line when Billy called yesterday evening to say that he wouldn't come to work and that he would stay at Steve's until he'd get better. "You don't need to sound so terrified. I think me and Lennie can manage at work by ourselves, thank you very much. Just take care of your boy."

"He's not my boy," he grumbled, hand clammy on the receiver, the churn of his stomach somewhat a welcome familiar sensation. The fact that he was able to actively joke about that side of his life was dumbfounding.

"Sure thing, short stuff."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't. You'd sing poems about me if you could, wondering what you'd do without me—" Billy had hung up the phone because he had known that Benny was probably still laughing at him in his small kitchen. He had leaned his forehead against the wall and had taken several deep breaths.

Small moments like this brought an odd sense of relief and happiness to Billy. The fact that all of a sudden, he could do certain things without being given the third degree, the fact that he didn't have to hide an essential part of himself was immensely gratifying and slightly terrifying at the same time.

He kissed Steve's top of the head. Whenever they had a small peaceful moment like this, despite the hardships and the worry, Billy couldn't stop himself from thinking about all those terrible nights when he couldn't sleep because of fear and frustration and pain,

nights when he had stared at the ceiling in the overwhelming darkness and pictured a life with Steve, doing small and insignificant things and just being unbelievably happy. Like him reading *The Hobbit* for Steve because apparently, it comforted him – learning such tiny things about Steve made Billy oddly satisfied and happy as if he was catching a secret glimpse of what only he was allowed to see. It was an exhilarating privilege. He didn't want to go all girly on Steve's ass but at times he just couldn't help it.

“Where are you, baby?” Steve whispered and Billy glanced down at him. He smiled softly when he met Steve's glassy baby doe eyes.

“Don't worry, you're there too.” Billy kissed him softly on the forehead, making Steve scrunch up his nose in such an adorable way that Billy actively fought to keep his stupid smile off his face.

“Sorry I ruined our Spring Break. You could go out tonight if you'd like. You don't need to get stuck here with me.”

“Were you dropped on your head when you were little?” Billy held on tight. “Where the fuck would I go without you? I'm not fucking stuck with you here. I want to be here with you. In fact, I'm having the time of my life.”

“Yeah, making tea and chicken soup.” Steve shook his head softly and scrunched his eyes tight when apparently, his head didn't agree with this movement at all. “I hate this.” Sighing, Billy brought one of his hands up and ran his fingers through Steve's hair.

“Don't be a dipshit. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but here.”

“We need to work on your bedside manner.”

“I don't know what you're talking about, sweetheart, my bedside manner is just fine. I've made you chicken soup, haven't I?”

“Yeah, you did.” Steve gave away a small content smile and coughed a little before adding, “And who would have thought that you're such a good cook? I actually feel cheated of all those home-cooked meals that I could have asked for.”

“Well, if I'd cook all the time, you wouldn't appreciate it so much.”

“Oh, but I would!”

“I think the last time we talked about this, we decided that you'd be the good house-husband.”

A beautiful smile bloomed on Steve's full lips and he coughed again, hiding his face in Billy's chest before saying softly, “Yeah, I remember that. I was so nervous that you'd be an asshole the moment you'd wake up, but you just made jokes and ate my food. It made me happy.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it's decided. When we're getting our own place, you'll be in charge of breakfast and I'll cook dinners. We'd probably have lunch at work,” Billy kept on talking without realizing that he'd been giving away his secret fantasy, “and maybe afford once in a full moon to order a pizza.”

“And who's doing the laundry?”

“We both do, though I have the terrible feeling that you'd be shit at it.” Billy grinned at Steve, who opened his eyes again and stared back as if choked with heady affection. “What?” Billy asked confused by the sudden soft look.

“We're moving in together?” Steve tried for amused and kind of indifferent, but the words came out small and insecure. A few months ago, Billy would have balked at the implication of it and would have lashed out in an attempt to cover for his mistake, but that angry part of him was simmering down now. So instead, he made Steve lay on the pillow next to him, both of them on their sides, staring at each other and taking their fill.

“Yes, we're movin' in together after graduation. You said you were in this for the long haul. Well, so am I, Steve.” Mouth dry and clammy hands, Billy grabbed fistfuls of Steve's t-shirt and held on. “You can be the house-husband while you go to college and I'll be the working husband that despises college education but still wants a future for

you.”

Steve curled his deft fingers over Billy's hands and held on as well, “Where do you want to go?”

“Wherever you'll go.” Billy swallowed thickly, the all-consuming emotion spreading like wildfire through his veins. “And if you want to stay in Hawkins, I'd stay here too. I'd fucking hate it, but I'd stay.” For you, echoed between them with all the overbearing realities of their emotions.

Steve watched him, his brown eyes searing and painfully clear for a guy that only moments ago seemed to run a high fever, “Do you want to go back to California?”

“No, there's nothing left for me there, except the ocean and my mother's grave. And I can visit both of them whenever I want.”

“I think we have great chances of moving to Chicago if you want. Or there's always New York – we might be neighbors with Jonathan and Nancy.”

“Yeah, no thanks.” Billy watched their hands together as if aligned in prayer. “I think Chicago sounds better. We'd be closer to Hawkins and we'd get to see everyone more often.” He stared back at Steve. “Are you sure you don't want to stay in Hawkins?”

“Don't get me wrong, I think it's terrifying leaving this place.” Steve cleared his voice. “But staying here among things and people I know would be just comfortable, that's all. And it wouldn't be easy for us to be together in a place like Hawkins. People would suspect sooner or later and they'd make our lives difficult. Whereas in a big place like Chicago? We could be whoever we want to be.”

“It's going to be difficult even there. Besides, we never stayed together for long periods of time. We might get to annoy the shit out of each other.”

“You'd snore and I'd whine about hair products.” Steve grinned. “You'd tell me off that I've got no clue how to do laundry and I'd be angry that you didn't take the garbage out.”

"It might drive you insane."

"It might piss you off."

"It might make you break up with me."

"Never." The word fell between them definitely like a sentence. A sentence to life. Steve squeezed his hands. "You're reading *The Hobbit* because you know it makes me feel better. And you cooked me chicken soup. You hum all the songs you know under your breath so I could sleep during the night when I have nightmares. You hate the music I listen to but you still let me play it. Things like these don't disappear overnight, Billy."

"But they might. Your patience might run thin, you might get to hate the way you put up with my anger and my attempts at putting distance between us."

"Then we'd deal then, but knowing us, something tells me that we won't fall apart without fighting for what we have."

Billy leaned forward and pressed his forehead against Steve's, ignoring the way it was still burning up, "I might fuck up every once in a while, but don't give up on me, sweetheart. I promise I'll try my fucking best."

"Same goes for you," Steve said in the small space between them.

"It's going to be tough."

"Yeah." Steve closed his eyes, his eyelashes almost brushing against Billy's cheeks. "My dad agreed to pay for college so he is going to keep a close eye on my grades. Plus he'll be insufferable when we get to visit him for holidays and stuff like that. Not to mention that I'll have to find work and with my current experience, I'll end up in retail. Oh, the horror! And you'd have to find some work as a mechanic and it won't be easy. And we'd have to learn how to pay our taxes and pay our bills on time and all the other stuff that adults do in general."

"I have some money set aside," Billy confessed. "Also, Benny gave me some money for my birthday to help us start over and said that if

we'd choose Chicago, Hopper's uncle lives there and he'd be able to get me some work."

"I have some money aside as well." Steve coughed, enthusiasm a little overwhelming. "I started to save up around the time I got together with Nancy – I never counted how much I have but I hope it could help."

"Every little thing is going to help, sweetheart." Billy nuzzled at his cheek, eyes closed as well, unbearably happy, basking into their heady affection that would so easily be called something else now. "I can't believe we're doing this."

"Me neither," Steve admitted quietly. "But I've been thinking about it for some time now."

"Me too."

They were both teetering on the verge of sleep and it made Billy warm and fuzzy. He didn't dare to move when he realized that Steve had already fallen asleep. He pulled the blanket over them again, hoping that maybe Steve would get to sweat the fever out of his system. The rays of the sun had moved a little further up, wrapping around their waists and warming them up. Drowsiness pulled at Billy's lids and he promised himself that he'd close his eyes just for a few minutes. The kids were coming later on as they wanted to check on them and he still hadn't put the chicken soup in a bowl to cool off for Steve to eat when he'd wake up.

He fell asleep just like that, ignorant of the beautiful image that they created: hands together, breathing in each other's space and bathed in the fading sunlight.

~O~

Billy woke up to an empty bed and to soft clinks downstairs in the kitchen. He rubbed his eyes then stared at the ceiling, listening to the sound of rain hitting the window pane. He'd never understood the weather in Hawkins, the way it would get sunny one day and rainy the next and – he bet – utterly cold too. Sometimes he missed the never-ending sunny days back in California where he could always go

to the beach and pretend life was great. The thing was though that here in Hawkins he didn't need to pretend anymore – life was better than it ever had been and it would probably get even better once he and Steve would move out to Chicago. Though not weather wise.

He stood up and went to the bathroom to take care of his needs. He wondered whether Steve was feeling better since yesterday evening when they had woken up groggy and tired but his fever had broken out. They had eaten chicken soup and Billy had made Steve take his medicine then change his t-shirt.

The kids came for a short visit and oohed and aahed when Steve showed visible signs of improvement. Max hugged Billy and stayed close to him throughout the whole short visit then they bundled up back into Nancy's car, who had come to pick them up, in a cacophony of stammered get wells and flailing limbs. Nancy got out of the car and had a chat with Steve about needing anything and feeling better. She stared back at Billy when she saw him coming out of the house to make sure all the little shitbirds had left.

Billy still broke into a cold sweat each time the kids mentioned anything about Steve and him. He really didn't want to create any issues for Steve or worse, put a distance between him and Henderson, in spite of the fact that Steve had insisted that he shouldn't worry so much. But then again, Steve hadn't lived in terror and so he would be unprepared to face the viciousness of people. Mr. Harrington's plea of saving Steve from hurt rang true and steady in those moments. They were open-minded kids but they came from normal families where – Billy was sure – the subject of queerness had never been discussed unless there was a need to condemn it. It was natural to worry.

But then Nancy grinned at him and waved, then kissed Steve on the cheek, wishing him well and she disappeared in the misty evening, taking the pests with her. Somehow Billy had been happy about that. Relieved too. Another day when they had seen Billy and Steve together and hadn't mentioned anything – no snide remark, no awkwardness, no glowering.

They went upstairs to Steve's room again and fell asleep, listening to Led Zeppelin II, which apparently was Steve's favorite album from the band. Billy watched his reflection in the mirror and smiled. Just

another thing to add to his *Things I've Never Done Before Meeting Steve* List, which also bore the name *Steve Will Never Fucking Find Out About This Shit*.

When Billy went downstairs in the kitchen, Steve was looking out on the window, a cup of steaming coffee in one hand. He was wearing the same grey sweats but had changed into a baseball shirt and judging by the still wet hair that curled around his ears and neck, he had taken a shower. The rain was knocking at the window hard enough to give the impression that in the end it just wanted to be let in. The grey fuzzy light made Steve somewhat smudged around the edges and impossible to touch.

Billy leaned his shoulder against the doorway and looked at Steve. He is beautiful, his heart trembled at the thought, a sweet sense of belonging coursing through his veins like molten lava. Right there, in the silence of the room, soaked in the freedom of being together without any constraints of time or any obligation to hide.

Billy loved most all these moments.

"Are you going to stay there much longer or can I get a morning kiss?" Steve said softly and turned towards Billy, a gentle smile curling on his lips. He still sounded like he had a stuffed nose and sore throat but at least his eyes weren't glassy anymore, a sure sign that his fever had disappeared. An answering smile bloomed on Billy's lips as he prowled towards Steve and gently kissed him, broad hands curling around Steve's hips.

"You're so needy, princess," he mumbled as he kissed Steve a few more times, making his boyfriend laugh out loud.

"Yeah, I can see it! I'm definitely the needy one." Steve set the cup of coffee on the counter and wrapped his arms around Billy's shoulders. "Wanna watch some movies with me today? Maybe order some pizza? Stay warm inside?"

"Don't your parents come back today?" Billy bit his lip as he nuzzled at Steve's cheek. He pressed his nose against Steve's neck and breathed him in. He always loved the scent of Steve, the warmth of his skin and the moles on the left side. Steve rested his head on Billy's

shoulder.

“Yeah, so?” Steve held on tighter. “They’re not going to say anything – you’ve been taking care of me when they’ve been uselessly away. Plus it’s normal for two friends to watch movies.” Steve nuzzled against Billy’s cheek again, his voice cutting as he murmured, “Let them even try.”

Billy sighed but didn’t add anything to the conversation. While Mr. Harrington didn’t exactly relent in the matter, he was polite with Billy each time they met, even so much as to inquire about his plans for the future with genuine curiosity. Harrington’s respect for Billy increased when Steve had been perfectly clear that Billy was in the advanced programme and it was more of a personal choice that he didn’t want to attend college rather than the actual possibility. Billy just had to admire Steve’s loyalty.

Neither Billy nor Mr. Harrington mentioned anything about their conversation to Steve, at least that’s what Billy suspected. But he hadn’t been sure lately as Steve seemed particularly tough on his parents in the last few weeks. Sometimes he wondered whether it was because their neglect had finally reached Steve’s limit or simply because he had heard something that he didn’t like. Whatever it had been, Steve had become less and less inclined to forgive his parents’ transgressing.

“Fine. In that case, who’s making breakfast?” Billy asked, his stomach growling in good timing. Steve laughed and stepped away. Billy kissed his cheek again because he fucking could and he tried nowadays to allow himself to be more tender when it came to Steve. It wasn’t always easy but he was giving his best.

“I suppose I do. I did promise that I’ll take care of breakfast while you take care of dinner.” He smiled mischievously as he went to the cupboard and pulled out a cup for Billy. “I wonder what you’re cooking today, Hargrove.”

“Well, you did promise me pizza, so nothing, pretty boy.” Billy poured a cup of coffee and went to sit at the table. “Plus we still have chicken soup so we’re not going to squander food in our house.”

“Our house,” Steve repeated softly, a shy smile blooming on his lips, and he ducked his head coyly as he took out a pan.

“Don't get sappy on me, pretty boy,” Billy said and took a sip of coffee, though the welcomed warmth of the feeling spread through his veins. He loved the bitter taste of the coffee first thing in the morning so he took a sip again, trying to hide how much it meant for him to see Steve so happy.

“It's house-husband now, thank you very much.” Steve pulled out the ingredients for scrambled eggs and grinned.

“In that case, you might need this, princess,” and Steve barely had time to turn as Billy threw him the ring that he had been wearing on the left middle fingers for over two years now. Steve scrambled for a few moments, before catching it and staring at it uncomprehendingly. Billy took another sip of his coffee and tried to act like his hands didn't tremble when he took the ring out like his heart didn't stutter in his chest as he threw it to Steve, as his stomach didn't bottom up in apprehension.

They were staring at each other from across the kitchen. Maybe there was something irreversibly damaged in Billy, but he couldn't help but love all these small moments that garnered so much importance in his and Steve's life. He was in love with all these small moments that garnered so much beauty, so much intensity – they seemed so small and yet so vital and Billy couldn't ask for more. He only hoped that their future life in Chicago would have more of this, small and insignificant as it might be.

Steve blushed heavily, his red ears visible even in the fuzzy light of the morning and it took him a few tries to put the ring on his middle finger. He ducked his head and stared back at Billy's empty finger, a white line in such a contrast with the rest of his golden skin that it seemed that the boy was wearing another ring. Billy hid his blush behind the cup of coffee as he drank half of it in one go, ignoring the burning sensation on his tongue.

Then Steve shook his head and smiling again, turned to the counter and started preparing eggs without adding anything. Billy stared down at yesterday's newspaper that lay on the table and picked it up.

A few minutes later, Steve turned on the radio and music conquered the comfortable silence between them.

Billy secretly hoped for a thousand more mornings just like this.

~O~

Apparently, it was going to be a beautiful summer this year in Hawkins. The sun was shining and the trees were in full bloom, for once not looking ominous or creepy. The green forest was an attractive ocean of green for once and the quarry was even more welcoming in the cool evenings. The cow shit smell was still very much present, but the barren fields of winter were now full of promising crops and animals finally enjoying some sunshine.

The fear of a new beginning sat heavily on his chest, clenching at it sometimes painfully and the desire to remain in Hawkins had been overwhelming in the last few days. The knowledge that he would have ended up resenting the small town mentality in Hawkins, getting choked out by its small-mindedness and its closed horizons, had been the only thing that had kept Billy on track.

Starting somewhere new and fresh was scary, but the thought of remaining here in Hawkins was more frightening. Maybe one day he could come back, work side by side with Benny's children, play Lennie's role and grumbling about those damn kids in the evenings to Steve, who'd smile and nod but not pay much attention to his grumblings. Or maybe they'd retire in a small bungalow next to the ocean and he could watch the sunset paint different hues of orange on Steve's face then watch the stars light up.

He didn't know what was going to happen in the future, but it was exhilarating nonetheless.

Billy stopped scowling at the sun and hugged Max tighter, his throat clogged and tight, painful to swallow. They had spent a lot of time together in the recent months, enjoying their time together and creating a system by which they could contact each other easier and without the fear that Neil would interfere. So Billy was going to send letters on her name to the Sinclair house and she was going to call him collect whenever she could.

"I'll fucking miss you, Mad Max," he confessed in her hair. He could feel her trembling in his arms, the moment painful for the both of them. All of a sudden she seemed so small, so tiny and frail and he had to swallow thickly again because he didn't feel like leaving. Maybe he should stay and protect Max who was starting high school in autumn. A half-thrown look at the boys surrounding them made him a tiny bit more relieved. Maybe the high school students needed protection from the rag-tag group.

"I'll miss you too, asshole." Her voice was wet and painful to listen to, so Billy just held tighter and longer.

Billy had never realized how much he'd miss Max in the frantic days after graduation when he and Steve had decided to move as soon as possible to Chicago to the exasperation of the Harringtons and the understanding of Benny and Tamara. There was no point in lingering in Hawkins too much, especially because they needed to get used to the city as much as possible before the real commitments would kick in. And the graduation ceremony had only cemented their ambition. It gave them a sense of finality that only Jonathan and Nancy could have understood, especially since both of them had decided to study in New York and had decided to leave at the end of the month as well. All four of them used to hunker down at one of the tables in the local diner and plan and plot and talk about their fears. Billy was new to the feelings of having people his own age sharing his fears, but it was cool to discover such feeling nonetheless.

In the days after graduation, Steve and Billy found themselves terrified by the idea that they were about to move in a completely different city. Chicago had overwhelmed them with its glorious anonymity and tall buildings, the constant flow of people and the number of shitty apartments that they had seen. Mr. Harrington had actually paid for their flight tickets as Benny and Tamara had accompanied them there to make sure that they'd get a favorable tenancy agreement and that they would choose the less shitty apartment. In those first few days, Billy had resented that they had needed the help of so many people to make a life of their own, but had grudgingly admitted that there was no other way. Plus he wanted to make the transition for Steve as smooth as he could so he kept his mouth shut, nodded when appropriate, and chose their

apartment because of the laundry room downstairs.

Hopper had talked with his uncle, who was more than happy to offer Billy a position at his shop, which apparently was much larger and catered to a lot of different cars, including vintage and custom-made. Tom Hopper had sounded quite friendly on the phone and when Billy had gone to meet him, he'd been nervous and terrified by the idea. It didn't help that he'd be the youngest there and that he'd need this position as long as he could hold on to it. But Tom Hopper was basically an older version of sheriff Hopper and had reassured Billy that they'd offer him the proper training. On the other hand, Steve had answered to a few ads and managed to find work at a small bookish café, which was quite close to their apartment building. He would start there at the beginning of next week, the first few weeks receiving some training and insight into what was basically required from him.

"You have the phone number and the address, right?" Billy asked her when they finally separated. Max's eyes were glistening with unshed tears as she nodded.

"Yeah. Just don't forget to call and let me know that you guys arrived all right."

"I will."

Max nodded again and let her hair fall over her face, hiding the tears that were falling down. Sinclair came and wrapped his bony arms around her shoulders, pulling her into an awkward hug. Billy looked up at Steve, who was being hugged the hell out of him by Henderson. Benny was talking with Tamara as they were waiting for all the awkward hugs and the goodbyes to be over. They were accompanying Billy and Steve as their pickup truck was far better suited to carry most of the shit that Billy and Steve had chosen to bring with them. They had also chosen to keep Billy's Camaro and leave Steve's BMW home for when they'd come back.

Billy closed his eyes and turned his face towards the sun.

A year.

All it had taken was a year.

And everything had changed.

In that very moment, he'd wish he had a power to go back in time, tell his younger self that everything was going to be just fine. That he didn't need to be terrified anymore, that there'd come a day when he would feel loved and that his father would be dead to him, but he'd be replaced by a so much better one. That he'd gain a sister and five other younger siblings. That he'd have a boyfriend and the people that cared about them would accept it.

Impossible dreams.

Impossible dreams that had become a reality.

He hugged the hell out of the rag-tag group and kissed Max on her cheek one more time then got in the car and pulled his aviators on his nose. He honked once and Steve got in the car as well, his Ray-Bans hiding his tears away. He was wearing a green t-shirt and blue jeans, and his hair was floppy and the Ray Bans hid his big brown eyes but he was still the most beautiful boy that Billy had ever seen.

He squeezed Steve's hand then pushed a cassette inside and revved the engine. The kids started to wave and holler and threaten them with bodily harm if they wouldn't come back soon or call or write them. They waved back and Billy honked until the kids disappeared in the rearview mirror and they were seen no more.

It hurt. Starting over in another city, away from everyone they loved. It was frightening and exhilarating. It was a new beginning.

The sun was shining and the trees were a green sea around them as they were making their way outside Hawkins. It would take them probably another hour for them to reach the interstate and then by late afternoon they'd make it to Chicago.

Bill took a cigarette out of his new pack and lit it up. *Ramble On* from Led Zeppelin began and Steve took his hand in his and squeezed. Billy stopped at a red light just outside of Hawkins and looked to the side as Steve – his sunglasses were resting on his head, his beautiful

brown eyes no longer hiding, full to the brim with unshed emotion. *Mine's a tale that can't be told, My freedom I hold dear*, Plant sang on.

“Hey, Hargrove,” Steve said softly and grinned widely when Billy checked the light one more time before looking back at his boyfriend.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.” Three simple words that made his chest constricted with utter happiness and to his horror, Billy found himself blushing so hard that even his ears seemed to burn. Steve chuckled, delighted to see his reaction.

“I love you too, Harrington,” Billy said quietly and full of heart and it was Steve's turn to blush. Benny's honk ripped through the magic so naturally, Billy put his hand out the window and flipped him off before starting to drive again. Steve took Billy's right hand in his and held on, a beautiful smile on his full lips as he stared out of the window.

Ramble On continued to play as Billy took Steve's hand and kissed it softly before settling down. He squirmed a few times in the driver's seat until he found a comfortable position, then took another drag of his cigarette.

At last, everything was all right with Billy Hargrove's world.

The End

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, all my thanks and my appreciation go to my lovely [lambchop33](#) who offered her help when I least expected it. I really appreciate her assistance and kind input. All mistakes left are mine and mine alone.

The promised epilogue will be posted as soon as it returns from my lovely beta. It takes place a couple of years later and it's from Steve's point of view because Billy would never get that sappy. :)))

Trivia time:

By 1985, Metallica had two albums out *Kill 'Em All* (1983) and *Ride the Lightning* (1984) and they were on their way to success. I am just sorry that *Master of Puppets* appeared in 1986 because I sure would have wanted to use some songs for Billy from that album.

Anthrax's first album was *Fistful of Metal* (1984). And *Led Zeppelin II* (1969) is a great album and I wholeheartedly recommend it. As for *Ramble On*, honestly, I just thought it fitted the end (and I really love it too so there's that).

I am a huge Tolkien fan as well. While I knew that *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954 – 1956) were published way ahead of my time, I was quite surprised that *The Silmarillion* was published only in 1977. Oh, wow! *Cujo* by Stephen King was published in 1981 and *Thinner* in 1984.

The Thing (1982) is a movie that still creeps me out and I honestly don't know why I made Lucas and Billy 'watch' it. :) Also, I googled Indianapolis to Chicago and apparently, by car it's only three hours and a half (probably depending on the traffic). I added a few extra hours because well, Hawkins is fictional after all but I still wanted the boys to be close to everyone.

My lovelies, seriously, if you made it this far, thank you from the bottom of my heart. The response to this fic was way more amazing than I ever expected. The wonderful comments and feedback that I have received from you made my day time and time again. So thank you for the comments and the kudos and the cheering and the useful info you guys gave me. I really appreciate each and every one of them.

7. Saint Anger - An Epilogue

Summary for the Chapter:

Three years later...

Notes for the Chapter:

You don't need to read this if you're satisfied with the previous ending. This is just a little something I wrote while I was writing chapter three and I loved it, although it's not long. Just a tiny glimpse into the future.

Steve pulled his hat on the head tighter and shoved his gloved hands into his pockets. The winter in Chicago wasn't any different from the one in Hawkins, except for the freaking wind that seemed to slip even through the thickest winter coats. Gloves didn't help much and Steve hated the way he had to wear his hat, his hair a goddamn disaster when he was taking it off. His nose was constantly red and runny and a lot of times his pockets were full of handkerchiefs that were in need of a wash.

He looked at the big clock just above the college entrance. Just another ten minutes, maybe less if Billy moved his ass.

Steve hid his smile in the blue muffler that Billy bought for him just last week. It was blue and big and warm and Steve loved it but loved, even more, the embarrassed way Billy had pushed it into his chest as if it had been a mistake all along and hadn't known what to do with himself. *You need to wear it, Harrington, not to look at it like the eighth goddamn wonder of the world.* Steve had smiled stupidly at him and had pressed a sweet kiss on his cheek, which had grossed out Billy, but still had him pressed Steve against the wall to show him how a proper thank you kiss should have worked out for them. And even later on that night, Billy had let him cuddle him because Steve was a sap and Billy would do just about anything for Steve.

They were still working on it: it was difficult at times for Billy to show his feelings, each kind gesture imbued with self-doubt and

anxiety. Then again, it was excruciating for Billy to be on the other side, on actually receiving affection. Steve had learned the hard way that Billy didn't like surprises, that he'd rather take any kind and small gesture in turn. He'd rather accept new gloves, a hand lotion for his calloused and aching hands, breakfast when he didn't have the time for it rather than big gestures that Steve had involved him in, like the fancy dinner at that Italian restaurant, whose memory even now made Steve wince. He couldn't forget anytime soon how uncomfortable and unhappy Billy had been, the frown deepening tenfold when the bill had come.

Having a real mature relationship in the real fucking world? Especially one that they needed to hide from the world's prying eyes? Not as fucking easy as the movies and books had him believe. The responsibilities alone were bothersome most of the times and the care for the other person was at times too much. Not to mention that in between his college classes, his work, and Billy's classes and his work, they didn't have much time to be together, to begin with. There were times when they were falling asleep without exchanging so much as a goddamn word, cuddling in the dark and holding tight to one another until Steve didn't know where he ended and Billy began. He came to appreciate Billy's light snores, his soft muffling sounds just because they meant that he was still there. Safe. Grounded in Steve's arms. Sometimes, just this was enough.

And somehow they still made it work. Mostly because of that big fight they had had around the half a year mark since they had moved to Chicago. They had been stressed out and exhausted. Billy's supervisor wasn't the nicest guy possible, although Tom had tried to run interference between them occasionally. Steve had been too stressed out with the finals and work. Everything had come to a brutal halt when they had thrown at each other the harshest accusations and reproaches. Steve had slept on the couch for one week and Billy had smoked probably double the number of packs per day.

But then one morning, Steve woke up to the realization that he missed Billy a lot and it was all fucking stupid. He coerced his boyfriend into having a long and heavy discussion in which they had decided never again to leave things festering for so long and to ask

for help. They made a promise to be committed to their relationship and do their best. Moreover, they had decided not to work Sundays anymore, no matter what, and although it was a luxury that they couldn't afford, they made it come true. They needed a day of their own. They had found it.

All these little things added up to their small insignificant lives but that made all the difference to them: their small and shitty apartment with terrible plumbing but awesome neighbours, the tiny shop around the corner with its great coffee, the mornings when they'd get to wake up together, the cuddling when one of them needed it. The little smiles at night when they watched TV and the small fights about who'd take the garbage out or whose turn was to do the laundry. The comfortably silent dinners, their cassettes mixing in their common drawer, their socks and underwear tumbling together in the dryer. The frantic kisses and the tender lovemaking, the late Friday nights dinners with their friends and the late calls with Benny and Tamara. The impromptu visits from their pack of nerds, the small and significant glances that said so much, the group hugs (that Billy always accepted reluctantly, with a scowl on his face, but that always made him smile softer after).

The photos on the fridge of them both or with the kids. A goofy one with Henderson and Lucas with both of them covered in cake from last year, a beautiful drawing of the Byers-Hopper family, courtesy of Will, and a sweet photo with Max and El, leaning against each other, tired after another Spring Dance spent well. One with all the group from their graduation and one just with Benny and Tamara after the big proposal. Letters to be answered in the first drawer under the window, bills to be paid in a small wooden basket (courtesy of Tamara) near the sink. Menus from various pizza joints or Chinese places above the fridge. Hair products under the sink in the bathroom next to cologne and lube (that, more than anything, amused Steve). Their own personalities splashed all over the small apartment, making their little life so beautiful and loved.

Steve perked up when people started to get out of the building. He had been so proud when last autumn, as their third year of living in Chicago began, Billy had decided to attend some engineering classes at their community college. He still worked hard for Tom Hopper,

having gradually built up a base of customers that trusted him with their cars but recently he had begun being interested in classic and custom made cars. Hence the classes. Miraculously enough, Mr. Anderson had kept his word and when Billy contacted him, he sent the reference letter almost straight away. The other one had come from Mr. Sinclair, who was just happy to have someone to talk about engineering when they were gathering around for the holidays. As for Steve, well, he was already thinking about post-graduate studies, though he wanted to start working as a social worker as soon as he could. It was going to be tough, but he thought that he had it in him.

When Billy finally made an appearance, Steve rolled his eyes but not even his muffler could hide his huge grin. Billy stopped at the top of the stairs and smiled brightly when he saw Steve. He was still wearing Benny's winter coat but he was filling it up much better. His hair was still on the longish side, curling gently around his ears and lacking much product, but his features were turning manlier as each day went by. He was struggling with his muffler as he got down the stairs and shoved the books in Steve's arms as he scowled at the dark sky.

"Why is it still so fucking cold?" He hissed as he managed to get the muffler around his neck and zip up the coat. "It's fucking March." No hat though, because Billy would rather drop dead than wear a goddamn hat. Even though it was freezing, and the wind was horrendous. He waved to a few of his colleagues, but his blue eyes didn't leave Steve's face and Steve would never get tired of being Billy's center of attention.

"I know, right?" He replied and gave Billy back his books, before making their way towards the Camaro. "We had Becca calling in sick today and Danny was one step away from keeling over. I swear to God, that guy doesn't know how to fucking pace himself. It was a fucking horrible day and I'm glad it's over."

"Then why are you here, pretty boy?" Billy asked as he shoved his books in the back seat. Steve had already dodged into the car and slammed the door behind him, trying to hide how hard he blushed. But Billy was like a goddamn hyena when it came to this sort of things so as soon as he started the engine and turned the heating on, he slightly turned towards Steve, his blue eyes the warmest.

“Missed me?” He muttered softly, Motorhead playing softly in the background, his hand gently holding Steve’s. His blue eyes were gleaming in the semi-darkness of the car, intense and wild as ever. Some things never changed.

“Shut up,” Steve rolled his eyes but quickly ducked his head to check the surroundings and when he saw the parking lot was mostly empty, he leaned forward and quickly kissed Billy. His boyfriend hummed appreciatively and pulled Steve gently by his coat to demand more. “I just needed to see your ugly face,” Steve mumbled in the darkness of the car, grateful for it. “And since I managed to get off one hour earlier, I thought we might go and have dinner together.”

“Someone made some great tips today,” Billy replied and smiled knowingly, but his soft eyes were telling a different story. “Pizza at Nico’s?” Steve simply nodded.

They held hands all the way there.

Things weren’t easy. They were both still struggling with their own issues. Billy still hated to be touched by other people and sometimes he had come to a head with his colleagues until they learned to respect his space. He still woke up drenched in sweat or moaning like an animal put to death and during those nights he’d never get back to sleep. He’d read a book with soft music playing in the background or watch TV. He’d stare out on the kitchen window as he’d smoke cigarette after cigarette. He hadn’t let his hair grow. Steve didn’t think he’d see that mullet anytime soon.

And sometimes Steve was the one waking up during night-time, shouting and fighting against monsters that hadn’t been there in a while. But he’d deal with his issues differently – he’d crowd against Billy and listen to his heart and he’d hold him tightly against his chest because sometimes it was grounding just to know that there was another person beside him and that person would never let go. And Billy? He’d claw his way to Steve if he had to. During those nights, his boyfriend would be the one to run his fingers through his hair and whisper funny stories from work.

It was difficult to make the regular trip back to Hawkins every once in a while, but they tried to do their best. They hadn’t missed a big

holiday yet. Most of the times, Billy would skip the driving and sleep in the passenger seat, letting Steve drive his Camaro. The music would play softly in the background and Steve would hum along with it. There'd be Led Zeppelin and Metallica, Tears for Fears and Bronski Beat. The Camaro was yet to fail them. Faithful as always, silent witness to their kisses and their small fights, and, one memorable time, to a rather awesome blowjob.

But this summer they were going to drive for a planned up two weeks holiday. One week to spend in Hawkins for Benny and Tamara's wedding – the giant had finally dared to propose to Billy's never-ending exasperation as he encouraged his adoptive father time and time again to just pop out the question because *Tamara sure as hell is going to say yes, Benny, for fuck's sake*. The second week they planned on having a little road trip just for the two of them. Steve was planning national parks and funny odd museums, Billy was planning how much money for the fuel they'd need and where they should stop to rest for the evening.

They didn't say *I love you* often.

They didn't have to.

Steve surprised himself smiling again, his face illuminated by the lights of the passing cars. He was dog tired, he needed to finish an essay by the end of the week, he'd work a double shift tomorrow most likely, and he wasn't sure whether the money he had in his wallet would be sufficient for dessert as well. But he'd never been so happy in his life before.

He turned to grin at Billy and squeezed his hand. His boyfriend glanced briefly at him before returning his attention in front of him.

“What is it, Harrington?”

“Nothing, Hargrove.” He shrugged and waited for Billy to stop at a red light before leaning forward and kissing him gently on the corner of his mouth. He smelled of oil and leather, pine and sweat. Billy's scent had always been addictive. “I'm just happy,” he mumbled jubilantly and didn't wait for Billy's reply as he leaned back. But he could see the slight flush on Billy's cheeks, the tender way in which

he squeezed his gloved hand.

"I'm happy too, pretty boy," he said quietly and Steve smiled again. "Now let me drive in peace. I'm starving." Steve chuckled and looked back out on the window.

This wonderful all-encompassing love left Steve breathless and in wonder at times, astonished that he'd been so lucky to have found it. He glanced down at Billy's ring, still resting on his own finger, never taken out, not even on their biggest disagreement. This summer, he was planning on giving a similar one to Billy, and he planned to engrave both rings with their names. A commitment to what they had. Just for them to know.

But for now, they'd eat at Nico's, trading stories about work and school. Then they'd go back to their small apartment and take quick showers. Or maybe just one. Together. They'd fall asleep in a mess of limbs and gentle kisses. And tomorrow they'd start all over again.

And something told Steve that both of them thought the same.

They wouldn't have it any other way.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you [lambchop33](#) for the beta. Any mistakes left are mine and mine alone.

As always, if you've made this far, thank you for reading. :)

PS. 100k o_O - how did I manage that?